
HEROES ARE NO TEARS

A high mountain, a low-lying crag, a fresh spring, an ancient pine, a brightly burning oven, a pot of green tea, an old man, a young boy.

“What is the most fearsome weapon under heaven?” asked the young boy. “Is it Little Li’s flying dagger, which never misses its target?”

“It used to be, but not anymore.”

“Why not?”

“Ever since Li Tanhua (1) passed on into immortality, his weapon can be considered lost forever.” The old man sighed dejectedly. “From this day forward, the world will never again see a person like Li Tanhua, and there will never again be a weapon like Little Li’s flying dagger.”

The young boy looked up at the mountain, at the white clouds floating slowly past the summit.

“So what is the most fearsome weapon in the world now?” asked the young boy again. “Is it the Great Mr. Lan’s Ancient Sword of the Blue Mountain?” (2)

“No.”

“Is it the ‘God of the South China Sea’ Blade King’s Great Iron Awl?” (3)

“No.”

“Is it Guangdong’s ‘Setting Sun’ Steward Ma Changfeng’s Silver Spear?”

“No.”

“Is it the Moon Blade of Fei Xingyin, who three years ago killed 8 bandits while on horseback on the old main road of Handan?” (4)

“No.”

“Ok, I know.” The young boy seemed very confident. “It’s Yang Zheng’s ‘Farewell Hook.’ It’s definitely Yang Zheng’s ‘Farewell Hook.’”

“No, it’s not,” said the old man. “Although the weapons you mentioned are indeed very fearsome, they are not the most fearsome.”

“Well, which is the most fearsome?”

“A solitary box.”

“A solitary box?” The young boy was amazed. “The most fearful weapon under heaven is a solitary box?”

“Yes.”

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(1) He is referring to the titular character from the Little Li’s Flying Dagger series. “Tanhua” is actually a title for someone who places third in the Imperial examinations of ancient China.

(2) This person’s surname “Lan” is the same character as the character for the color blue.

(3) Throughout this story I will consistently translate the Chinese character 刀 as “blade.” This character encompasses all kinds of blades, from butchers knives, to swords. I will only translate the character 劍 as “sword.”

(4) Handan is a city in Hebei Province, not very far from where I live in the capital of Hebei, Shijiazhuang!

CHAPTER 1 – A SOLITARY BOX

A solitary person, a solitary box.

A quiet, ordinary person, carrying an old-fashioned, ordinary box. As the sun set, this person quietly entered the ancient city of Chang'an.

Part 1

The fifteenth day of the first month of the lunar calendar.

Chang'an. (1)

Zhuo Donglai shut the door, closing out the wind and snow that for a thousand years had been a part of the ancient city of Chang'an. (2) He took off his violet, sable-fur coat and hung it on the violet-red sandalwood coat hanger propped to his left. In his right hand he held a set of violet-red copper tongs, which he used to stoke the fire in the violet-red copper brazier in front of him, a brazier which was never extinguished.

Next to the brazier was a violet-red sandalwood chair, over which was draped a fur of violet-red sable. Next to the chair was a violet-red sandalwood table, upon which was a violet crystal bottle, filled with Persian red wine.

It only took two steps to reach the table, upon which he could at leisure pour himself a cup of wine.

He liked the color violet. (3)

He liked famous race horses, beautiful women, luxurious clothes, and good wine. He liked to enjoy himself.

He was extremely particular and picky, and always planned everything meticulously. He was never willing to waste even the slightest amount of energy, and was also never careless. He didn't even make exceptions for small everyday matters of life.

This was Zhuo Donglai.

Perhaps it was because he was this type of person that he had managed to stay alive to this day,

He sat down and took a sip of wine.

The warmth of the luxurious and beautiful room, the fragrant, sweet wine, had already driven the cold from his body. He suddenly felt very tired.

The past two days of preparation for tonight's grand ceremony had already thrown his normal routines into chaos.

He definitely could not allow any mistakes. Even the smallest mistake could lead to a larger blunder, a blunder which might never be remedied. And if that happened, not only would he feel guilty for the rest of his life; his master would also be implicated. In fact, it could even affect all Jianghu.

The most important thing was that he could not allow Sima Chaoqun's life or reputation to be harmed in any way, especially now, at the peak of his success. (4)

A person like him, who had worked so hard to become an idol to the heroes of Jianghu, must succeed in every undertaking, must never fail.

There were two things in life that Zhuo Donglai could not tolerate: mistakes and failure.

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Sima Chaoqun was already undefeatable.

He rose to prominence in Jianghu at the age of eighteen. Throughout his thirty-three major battles, he had never once been defeated.

He was tall, strong and handsome, with a mighty and bold disposition. His rugged face always carried a bright smile. Even his enemies could not deny that he was a unique man, and there would never be a shortage of beautiful women willing to accompany him. And yet, he was completely faithful not only to his wife, but also to his children and his friends. Not once had he been involved in any sort of scandal.

He was extremely proud of this.

However, what was most worthy of pride in his life was what he had accomplished in the past two years. Using all of his martial arts ability, wisdom, good character and forthright work ethic, had traveled the road between Heshuo in the Central plains (5), all the way to Northeast China, persuading 39 of the greatest heroes and bandits to join him. Rising from the depths of the underworld to the pinnacle of righteousness, he had organized a never-before seen Great Protection Agency. For reasonable rates, they protected any trader or traveler in the region.

No mishap had every befallen anyone who stood under the protection of their violet-bordered satin banner, emblazoned upon which was the character "Great."

This was an unprecedented, glorious achievement in the world of Jianghu. And it was something that could not be achieved using iron and blood alone.

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Sima Chaoqun was currently thirty six years of age, and he could already be considered an idol to the heroes of Jianghu – An invincible heroic idol.

Only he and Zhuodonglai knew what it truly took to attain this position.

Part 2

After finishing his first cup of wine, Zhuo Donglai once more thought through the plan for the night's grand ceremony, from start to finish.

He always drank slowly, but thought extremely quickly.

Today was the first time ever that Sima Chaoqun would accept a personal disciple. From whosever perspective you looked at it, this matter would cause a huge sensation in Jianghu.

The most shocking part of it all was that Sima Chaoqun's first disciple was Yang Jian, who had just one month ago betrayed the "Central Plains Lion Clan." (6)

Among the forty groups of heroes who occupied the northern roads, the Lion Clan was the only one who refused to join Sima Chaoqun's alliance. They were also the largest and most powerful of the clans.

Yang Jian had been one of the four most trusted lieutenants of the Lion Clan Leader, Mr. Zhu.

No one in Jianghu would ever have imagined that Yang Jian would betray the Lion Clan. But everyone knew that the day after Yang Jian left the clan, "Fierce Lion" Zhu Meng had sent messages throughout the martial world, expressing his opinion.

—No matter the sect, school or clan, anyone who gave haven to Yang Jian was an enemy of the Lion Clan, and would receive full and unequivocal retribution.

And now, Sima Chaoqun was not only giving him haven, he was opening the doors wide, lighting incense, and accepting him as a disciple.

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Even though the Lion Clan had not joined Sima Chaoqun's "Great Protection Agency," they had also not opposed him, let alone attempted to overthrow him. (7)

"Fierce Lion" Zhu Meng was sinister, fierce, and cold-blooded. He was not the type of person to trifle with, and when he made a promise, he kept it. If he made it known that he would fight dirty in order to win, then he would use any and all methods to secure victory.

In fact, in order to achieve his goals, he wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice the heads of his 3,800 subordinates and disciples.

What he cherished most in life was a woman named Die Wu. (8)

Die Wu was beautiful, and her dancing even more beautiful.

The man who comprehended the beauty of women more than anyone in the world, the Marquis Di Qinglin, once had an opportunity to watch her dance before he passed away. He was left speechless. Later, others would ask him how he felt about her dancing, and after a very long time he would sigh and say, "I can't say. I've never seen a mortal person with such legs, never imagined that they could even exist."

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Everyone in Jianghu was convinced that no matter the circumstances, Zhu Meng would never let Yang Jian off.

Even if he held off on moving against Sima Chaoqun, he would definitely kill Yang Jian.

Zhuo Donglai disagreed.

He believed that no matter the situation, Zhu Meng wouldn't touch a hair on Yang Jian's head.

He was convinced.

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The grand ceremony would be public. Those who received invitation cards could enter the inner chamber as Sima Chaoqun's personal guests. Those without invitation cards could congregate in the outer courtyard to observe.

Among the disciples of the Lion Clan, there were many who had survived hundreds of battles and killed countless enemies.

In Jianghu, there were many professional assassins who could kill well-protected targets in the twinkling of an eye. Any of these people could show up, blend into the crowd, and wait for an opportunity to kill Yang Jian.

Throughout the course of the grand ceremony, there would be many such opportunities.

But Zhuo Donglai believed that the ceremony would be completed smoothly, and that not a hair on Yang Jian's head would be harmed.

The reason was that he had calculated every possible situation and circumstance; every person who could possibly pose a threat to Yang Jian was under his surveillance.

In preparation, he had already dispatched 186 top-notch masters from the "Northern Roads 39 Great Protection Agencies," each of whom could easily handle 27 or 28 opponents.

Zhuo Donglai had split them into eight groups, each of whom would take responsibility for a different area.

But one of the groups he set aside especially to deal with three people.

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"Which three people?"

That morning, Sima Chaoqun had asked Zhuo Donglai, "Why do you need a whole group to deal with them?"

Zhuo Donglai only needed to speak the names of two of the people to answer the question.

"Because of the three people, one is Han Zhang and the other is the Wooden Chicken." (9)

At the moment, Sima Chaoqun was eating.

He was a strapping man, and needed lots of rich food to maintain his vigorous physique.

His breakfast this morning was a beef loin that weighed about three pounds, along with ten eggs and a huge helping of fruits and vegetables.

The beef was slow roasted over charcoal, covered with spices and juicy sauce, and was extremely tender.

This was one of his favorite foods, but as soon as he heard these two names, he dropped the curved Persian knife he was using to cut the meat. He stared at Zhuo Donglai with eyes as sharp as knives.

“Han Zhang and the Wooden Chicken are both here?”

“Yes.”

“Have you seen them before?”

“I haven’t.” Zhuo Donglai calmly continued, “I’m sure no one here has ever seen them.”

Most people in Jianghu had heard of them, but few had ever seen them.

Han Zhang was the same as Yang Jian. He was a lieutenant of the “Fierce Lion,” one of his most trusted followers, and also one of the most dangerous.

Zhu Meng rarely let him leave his side.

The Wooden Chicken was even more dangerous than Han Zhang.

He had no home and no permanent residence. He had no set pattern of life, and therefore, was impossible to find.

But if someone needed him, and he believed that he needed that person, he would suddenly appear.

What he normally required of others was pearls, jewels, gold or huge amounts of bank notes.

What others normally required of him were his flying noose and his two blades.

One long blade, one short blade.

He used a blade to cut peoples’ throats as gently and skillfully as a farmer cutting crops with a sickle.

When he killed people with his noose, it was just like a dainty playboy placing a string of pearls around the neck of a lover.

Of course, he required payment, and if the payment you offered was not sufficient, he wouldn't kill an ant for you, even if you knelt on the ground and begged.

Whoever it was that required his services, they must first offer a sufficient payment. There was only one person who was an exception, because he owed this person his life.

And that person was Zhu Meng.

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The curved knife, its hilt encrusted with jasper, lay on the wooden tray. The blade was covered with meat juices.

Sima Chaoqun used a delicate piece of silk to rub the blade clean until it shone. When he was finished, he asked Zhuo Donglai, "You've never seen them, how do you know they are here?"

"I know," he said coolly. "I know because I know."

Did this qualify as an answer? This type of answer wasn't an answer at all. No one would be satisfied with this response.

And yet Sima Chaoqun was satisfied.

Because it was uttered by Zhuo Donglai, and he trusted Zhuo Donglai's judgement, as much as he trusted that the knife on the wooden tray could cut meat.

And yet his eyes suddenly shone with a strange expression. And then he said something very strange.

"A mistake!" he said. "This time, Zhu Meng made a mistake!"

"Why?"

"Han Zhang and the Wooden Chicken are already here?" he asked.

“Yes,” said Zhuo Donglai.

“Can they leave with their lives?”

“No.”

“Are they useful to Zhu Meng?”

“They are.”

“Would I send two useful people to their deaths?” Sima asked Zhuo Donglai.

“Well, would I?”

“No.”

Sima laughed. “So, Zhu Meng made a mistake.”

Zhuo Donglai didn’t laugh. He waited until Sima was finished, then slowly said, “Zhu Meng didn’t make a mistake.”

“Oh?”

“He didn’t dispatch them here to send them to their deaths.”

“Then what did he send them here to do?”

“To be a front,” said Zhuo Donglai. “Han Zhang and the Wooden Chicken are just a front.”

“Why?”

“The person sent to assassinate Yang Jian is neither of the two. It’s someone else. If we only take precautions against them, then the third person will have a much easier time making a move.”

“Who is the third person?”

“It’s a young man. He wears clothes of homespun cloth and carries a sword. He’s staying in a cheap little inn, and for every meal he eats a bowl of noodles with boiled cabbage.(10) He’s been here for three days, but he’s never left his room other than to eat.”

“He locks himself in a bug-ridden room doing what?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where is he from?”

“I don’t know.”

“What sword skill has he studied? Is his sword skill high or low?”

“I don’t know.”

Sima Chaoqun’s pupils constricted.

He and Zhuo Donglai had been friends for twenty years. From the distressed and impoverished muck, they had clawed their way up to their current position. No one understood him better than Zhuo Donglai, and no one understood Zhuo Donglai better than him.

And yet he never imagined that he would hear the three words “I don’t know,” come from Zhuo Donglai’s mouth.

When Zhuo Donglai wanted to investigate a person, he needed at the most 6 to 10 hours to uncover that person’s origin, family circumstances, habits, hobbies, martial arts affiliations, most recent whereabouts, and current destination. He could find out everything. Not only was he extremely experienced in this type of matter, he had many different methods, many special methods, each of which was very effective.

Sima Chaoqun knew all about these methods.

“He’s staying in a cheap inn,” said Sima Chaoqun, “and he wears clothing made from coarse materials. He eats noodles with boiled cabbage. From these facts you can at least see that he is not a very successful person. He must not come from a very good family.”

“It would seem that way,” said Zhuo Donglai, “but this young man is an exception.”

“Why?”

“Because of his bearing. When I saw him, even though he was in a little shop eating boiled cabbage noodles with a bunch of coolies and rickshaw drivers, he seemed as if he had just placed first in the Imperial Examinations and was feasting with the Emperor. Even though he was only wearing clothing made from homespun cloth, it seemed as if he was wearing a marten coat worth a thousand pieces of gold.”

“Maybe he was purposely puffing himself up.”

“This kind of attitude cannot be feigned. Only someone who is completely confident in themselves can have this kind of bearing. I’ve never seen someone so confident.”

Sima Chaoqun’s eyes shone. It seemed he was very interested in this young person.

Zhuo Donglai continued, “The name he used at the little inn was ‘Li Huicheng,’ but it’s definitely fake.”

“How do you know it’s fake?”

“Because I saw the name he wrote at the sales counter. He wrote it himself, and correctly, but very stiffly. When a person who can write characters signs their own name, it shouldn’t be so stiff and unnatural.”

“When he speaks, what kind of accent does he have?”

“I didn’t hear him speak, but I asked the innkeeper.”

“What did the innkeeper say?”

“The innkeeper used to work for a protection agency, and has been to a lot of places. In fact, he can speak the dialects of seven or eight different provinces. But even he couldn’t tell where this Mr. Li is from.”

“Why not?”

“Because this Mr. Li can speak the dialects of those seven or eight provinces even better than the innkeeper.”

“What about his clothing?”

You can tell a lot about a person from the clothes they wear.

All clothing is made from different materials. Even homespun cloth has many different types. Different areas have different methods of dying and weaving, as well as yarn production.

Zhuo Donglai was also an expert in these types of matters.

"I'm sure you saw his clothes," said Sima Chaoqun. "What could you tell?"

"I couldn't tell anything. I've never seen that type of cloth. I've never even seen the type of thread used to sew the clothing. I'm sure that he spun the thread himself, wove the cloth himself, and sewed the clothing himself. Even the cotton was probably grown by himself somewhere. Somewhere that neither you nor I have ever been to."

The two of them had set out together in the beginning, and had adventured throughout China.

Sima Chaoqun laughed bitterly. "We've been almost everywhere." (11)

"I also didn't see his sword," said Zhuo Donglai. "His sword was wrapped up in cloth, and always at his side."

"The cloth the sword was wrapped in, was it the same cloth that his clothing was made from?"

"Exactly the same."

Sima Chaoqun suddenly laughed. "It seems this Mr. Li really is an eccentric. If it turns out that he's here to kill me, then tonight should be really enjoyable."

Part 3

Dusk.

Inside the little restaurant, the fragrances of lard and stir-fry, the sweat of coolies and rickshaw drivers, the odor of hard liquor, hot peppers, leeks and garlic, all mixed together to create a strange, hard-to-describe smell.

Little Gao liked this smell.

He liked the smell of clouds floating past a mountain peak, and the delicate fragrance a cold wind passing through trees and leaves. And yet, he also liked this smell.

He liked the smell of noble and elegant scholars, but he also liked these sweaty men, who sat eating flatbread-wrapped leeks, garlic heads and fatty meat, and drank hard liquor.

He liked people.

This was because he had been alone for too long, and rarely saw people, only the green mountains, white clouds, flowing water and ancient pines. Three months ago he had finally returned to the world of men. And in three months time he had already killed four people.

Four local warlords with illustrious reputations, people who deserved to die, and yet couldn't be killed.

He liked people, and yet he killed people.

He didn't like killing people, and yet he killed them.

The world is filled with many things like this, things that leave you with no leeway to make any decision.

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Chang'an. Ancient Chang'an. A grand city, filled with ancient history and the feeling of countless legends.

Little Gao didn't come to Chang'an for any of these reasons, though.

He'd come for a person—the forever invincible hero Sima Chaoqun.

He'd brought his sword with him, and his sword sat at hand next to him. It was forever at hand.

The sword was wrapped tightly in cloth.

Few people could see this sword. From the time it was forged until now, few people had even had the opportunity to see it.

This sword was not a sword for people to see.

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Little Gao knew that someone was watching him.

The second day he'd arrived, he'd noticed. It was a very thin man, wearing very expensive clothing, with a pair of cold eyes that seemed like they would never contain an ounce of emotion. His eyes looked like they might be grey.

He had seen eyes like this before.

When he was eleven years old, he had almost been killed by a leopard. That leopard's eyes had looked exactly the same.

As soon as this person appeared, it seemed as if everyone in the little restaurant had stopped breathing for a moment.

Later, he found out that he was the trusted assistant of the top chief of the "Steward of the 39 Northern Roads Great Protection Agency," Sima Chaoqun. His name was Zhuo Donglai. (12)

Little Gao slowly ate his bowl of boiled cabbage noodle soup, and he felt very happy.

He knew that Zhuo Donglai and Sima Chaoqun would definitely be suspicious of him, would discuss him, would guess about who he was.

He was sure they would never figure out who he was.

He was like his sword. Few people had ever seen him.

Part 4

The sky slowly grew dark. Even though there was no lamp in the room, the lamplight from outside shone brightly.

A cold wind blew in through the cracks in the windows, and the faint sound of speaking and laughter could be heard coming from the courtyard outside.

Sima Chaoqun knew that the guests who had come without an invitation to observe the ceremony outnumbered those he had personally invited.

He also knew that everyone was waiting for him to appear, waiting for the chance to see him.

And yet he sat in his seat, not moving. Even when his wife entered, he didn't move.

He was extremely irritated.

Burning the incense, accepting a disciple, throwing a huge banquet, receiving guests... he thought all of these things were extremely irritating.

He just wanted to sit there peacefully and have a drink.

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Wu Wan understood what he was thinking.

No one understood Sima Chaoqun better than Wu Wan. They had been married for eleven years, and had a nine-year old child.

She had come to urge him to go out as soon as possible.

She had opened the door quietly and entered. Now she left, closing the door behind her, not wanting to disturb him.

As she left, tears streamed down her face.

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Sima poured himself another cup of alcohol.

He'd long since passed the first cup. This was the twenty-seventh cup.

What he was drinking wasn't wine, like Zhuo Dongli drank, but baijiu (13). Even though it was colorless and flavorless, when you drank it, it burned like a fire in your stomach.

But he didn't drink this cup.

The door quietly opened again. This time the person who entered wasn't Wu Wan, it was Zhuo Donglai.

Sima lifted his head and placed the cup underneath his chair. He looked at the shadow of Zhuo Donglai in the doorway.

"Is it time for me to go out?"

"Yes."

Part 5

The outer courtyard was illuminated brilliantly and resounded with the clamor of voices.

Little Gao squeezed his way through the crowd. He wasn't one of Sima Chaoquan's invited guests, so he couldn't enter the main hall, where the lamplight shone even more gloriously.

People also packed the inside hall, but they were all famous, with status, positions and power.

In addition to these famous individuals, there were also several strapping men dressed in dark green gowns of satin and sheepskin. They were strong

and nimble as they received the guests, and their eyes shone. They definitely would not allow anything improper to happen, no matter how small.

Suddenly the voices grew quiet.

The chief of the “Steward of the 39 Northern Roads Great Protection Agency,” the most powerful person in the martial world, the forever invincible Sima Chaoqun, had finally appeared.

Sima Chaoqun walked out wearing a black and white garment, carefully tailored to make him look even more powerful and tall than normal, and younger than his actual age.

He greeted the guests in a forthright and honest fashion, and even walked to the stone steps at the front of the hall to wave at the crowd in the outer courtyard.

Amidst the ear-splitting cheering that followed, Little Gao wasn’t paying attention to Sima Chaoqun, but two other people.

Their clothing and features were quite ordinary, but their eyes were cold and fearsome, filled with murder.

They didn’t stand together, or even look at each other, but each of them had a group of eight or nine people close by, observing them, careful to maintain a suitable distance.

Little Gao smiled.

He could tell that these two people were here for Yang Jian, first class assassins dispatched by Zhu Meng.

He could also see that Sima Chaoqun and Zhuo Donglai had assigned him the same status as them, as there were people keeping an eye on him as well. Actually, there were a lot of people watching him. Zhuo Donglai must suspect him of being the most dangerous of them all.

“But Zhuo Donglai made a mistake this time!” Little Gao smiled to himself. “Assigning people to watch me is really a waste of manpower.”

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Two huge red candles sat burning on a long table in the middle of the great hall.

Sima Chaoqun sat in front of the table on a violet-red sandalwood chair, over which was draped a tiger skin.

A red felt spread out in front of the chair, upon which rested a violet satin prayer mat.

The grand ceremony was about to start.

The two men with the murderous eyes had already begun to move forward slowly. The men watching them followed, their hands reaching underneath their robes.

Obviously they had deadly weapons hidden in their garments.

If these two took any action, the men's hands would spring forth with weapons and slaughter them in a split second, before they even reached the great hall.

Little Gao was certain these two wouldn't succeed.

—There was definitely a third person, and this was who Zhu Meng had actually sent to assassinate Yang Jian.

It turned out Little Gao thought the same way as Zhuo Donglai. The only difference was that he knew the third person wasn't himself.

—Who was this person?

Little Gao's pupils suddenly constricted.

He'd caught sight of a person who normally wouldn't attract any attention, dodging through the crowd.

And an ordinary, old-fashioned box, which definitely wouldn't attract anyone's attention.

He wanted to push his way forward, but the crowd was too packed. The star of the grand ceremony had just entered the main hall.

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Yang Jian's pale, sallow face wore a smile.

Six people escorted him in.

Little Gao didn't recognize these six men, but almost anyone who had any experience wandering in Jianghu would know them. Most of them were famous experts in the Protection Agency industry, but even more impressive was that one of them was "Cloudy Sky," the notorious bandit who in recent years had run amok on the Guanluo Road. (14)

Under the protection of six experts like this, who could possibly harm Yang Jian?

He had already reached the red felt, and stood in front of the violet mat prepared especially for him to bow to Sima Chaoqun. (15)

In that very moment, the outer courtyard burst into motion. There were already twenty people amidst the crowd on the ground, bleeding and screaming miserably.

The people who had fallen were not just Zhuo Donglai's subordinates. Many were just random innocents.

This was the plan set upon by Han Zhang and the Wooden Chicken.

They obviously knew people were watching them, so before they made their move, they would try to throw the crowd into chaos by shedding innocent blood.

Amidst the chaos, they would fly forward and pounce on Yang Jian.

Little Gao didn't even glance at them.

He knew that no matter what method they used, they wouldn't succeed. He kept watching the person with the box.

Except, this person had already disappeared.

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Sima Chaoqun sat tall in the violet-red sandalwood chair. His countenance and facial expression did not change.

The assassins had already been contained outside of the main hall.

Yang Jian had already been whisked away by the six masters, out through a door in the back of the main hall.

Little Gao had already determined which direction the door faced.

The men following being distracted, Little Gao suddenly dashed forward into the main hall, and then used a strange and indescribable martial arts move to slide across the wall and out a window.

The window and the door both faced the same direction.

Part 6

Outside the window was a small courtyard filled with the fragrance of plums and pine trees, a scent that would cause anyone to feel extremely happy. Black-garbed guards packed the long, gloomy walkway on the side of the courtyard. Long blades hung from their waists.

At the end of the walkway was a door.

As soon as Little Gao shot out of the window, he caught sight of Cloudy Sky and the others carrying Yang Jian through the door.

And then the door shut.

The black-garbed guards had already unsheathed their long blades. The blades gleamed, and ten of the guards charged toward Little Gao.

They didn't ask who Little Gao was? They didn't ask why he was here?

No. Because they had received orders: if any stranger entered the courtyard, they were to kill on sight, no questions asked!

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Little Gao didn't explain why he was here, or what the circumstances were. It was already past the time when words could be used to make explanations.

At the moment, the only thing he could do was attack first, using his fastest techniques.

He had to get to the door at the end of the walkway, as quickly as possible.

Light of shimmered forth from the blade, despite the fact that Little Gao's sword was still wrapped up in cloth.

He didn't draw the sword. Using only the rough cloth sheathing, he had already flicked aside four blades, and knocked down four people.

In a flash, he entered the walkway. Seven or eight more men attacked him. He knocked them down and dashed toward the door.

But Zhuo Donglai had already reached the door.

He had been hiding behind the scenes the whole time. Upon any sudden change, he could appear at a moment's notice.

Little Gao looked at him and let out a long breath. "I thought I would make it on time, but sadly I'm late."

A blade flickered behind him, but Little Gao didn't look back. Zhuo Donglai waved a hand and the descending blade light suddenly disappeared.

"Why are you here?" asked Zhuo Donglai coldly. "What do you want?"

"I just want to see someone."

"Who?"

"A killer."

Zhuo Donglai smiled coldly. "No one can kill anyone here."

"They can," said Little Gao. "There's one who can."

Zhuo Donglai's expression suddenly changed, because he had just noticed the faint reek of blood.

Shockingly, the smell of the blood emanated from behind the door.

Zhuo Donglai turned around and pushed it open, and in that moment, it seemed as if he had fallen into hell.

Part 7

Behind the door was what used to be a delicate, resplendent room. As of now, it had been turned into hell.

Hell does not contain living people, and neither did this room.

The seven living people who had just entered the room would never live again. Some had throats cut open, some had hearts impaled, stabbed through from front to back.

The most miserable of all was Yang Jian.

His head was nowhere to be seen, and scattered next to his body were a handful of paper cards. Written on each card were eight characters: "This is the end fate of a traitor!"

**

There were four windows in the room, all open.

Where was the killer?

The stars twinkled outside the open windows, and from far off could be heard the raucous sound of drums and gongs. Tonight was the night of the

fifteenth day of the first month of the lunar calendar, so the night curfew had been lifted. (16)

Zhuo Donglai stood silently for a long time, the cold wind blowing on his face. Surprisingly, he didn't dispatch people to pursue the assassin. Instead, he turned around and stared at Little Gao.

"You knew killers had been sent here?"

"If I knew, then you should have known as well." He sighed. "I've been wanting to see that person for a long time."

"But there wasn't just one killer."

The throats had been cut with a slender, sharp blade. The hearts had been pierced with an extremely sharp-tipped spear.

And Yang Jian's head had been lopped off with some sort of ax.

Zhuo Donglai seemed calm again. Calm and composed.

"You should be able to tell that there were at least three people here," he said. "There is nobody who can use three different methods, and completely different weapons, to kill people."

"Yes, there is." Little Gao's response was completely heartfelt. "There's one."

"You really believe that there is a person like this in the world? Some expert who can use three different weapons at the same time to kill seven people?"

"Yes!" said Little Gao, with complete confidence. "Who knows, maybe there's even two people. But definitely at least one."

"Who is this person?"

"I don't know." Little Gao sighed again. "If you hadn't blocked my way just now, I might have had a chance to see him."

Zhuo Donglai continued to stare at him. His palms felt as if they were sweating.

"Although," said Little Gao, "I actually didn't know he was here in Chang'an. And I never imagined that he would be working as an assassin for Zhu Meng."

Zhuo Donglai continued to stare at him for a long time. He stared at his facial expression, his bearing, the way he stood, the cloth-wrapped sword in his hand. He suddenly said, "I believe you. If you want to leave, you can leave."

This shocked the standers-by. This was not Zhuo Donglai's style. He had never let someone off so easily.

The only reason he would do something like this was if he considered Little Gao to be very dangerous. Under such circumstances, he wouldn't want to give rise to any more trouble.

Little Gao laughed.

"I know that I can leave any time I want," he said. "The thing is, I don't want to go."

"Why?"

"Because there's something I need to tell you."

"What's that?"

"My surname isn't Li, and my given name isn't Huicheng. Furthermore, I didn't come here for Yang Jian."

"I know," said Zhuo Donglai. "Because of that, I'm letting you leave."

"Actually, there are a lot of things you don't know." Little Gao laughed. "And because you don't know, I'm not leaving."

Zhuo Donglai's hands clenched into fists.

He suddenly realized that this young man had a streak of unruliness that was at first difficult to detect. He was like a wild animal that had just wandered down from the deep mountains, not the least bit afraid of anyone or anything.

"I'm surnamed Gao, and I came here for a person."

"For who?"

"For Sima Chaoqun. The invincible Sima Chaoqun."

Within Zhuo Donglai's clenched fists, cold sweat sprang forth.

"You're Gao Jianfei (17)! The young swordsman Gao Jianfei who in three months time assassinated the four greatest masters of the sword sects Kunlun, Huashan, and Kongtong!"

"Yes," said Little Gao. "That's me."

**

The night grew darker, the wind blew harder.

"I don't kill people in secret," said Little Gao. "So set a date, and a place. I want to find out if Sima Chaoqun really is invincible."

Zhuo Donglai laughed. "I guarantee that you will find out. I just wish you didn't have to."

Part 8

There was no curfew on the long street. The flower markets and festive lanterns were very picturesque.

There were all types of lanterns and all types of people. But it seemed as if Little Gao didn't notice them at all.

Zhuo Donglai had promised to offer a response within one month, and had promised to give him a chance at a fair fight with Sima Chaoqun.

This was why he had come to this place, and yet it seemed as if he was not very focused on the matter.

As of now, his mind was focused on a solitary person, and a solitary box.

—Exactly what kind of person was he? Exactly what kind of fearsome weapon was this box?

Part 9

At the same moment, amidst the black of night and the cold blowing wind, a solitary person, carrying a solitary box, quietly left the ancient city of Chang'an.

**

- (1) Chang'an is of course modern-day Xi'an in Shaanxi Province.
- (2) Zhuo Donglai's name in Chinese is 卓东来 zhuō dōng lái. "Donglai" literally means "comes from the east."
- (3) In this passage and the following passage, there are many color-related descriptions which all use the same Chinese character for the color purple. But most of these things, when translated into English, are actually the color red. So I'm going to consistently translate these things as violet.
- (4) Sima Chaoqun's name in Chinese is 司马超群 Sīmǎ chāoqún. Sima is a (commonly) uncommon Chinese surname. Chaoqun literally means something outstanding or extraordinary.
- (5) He Shuo refers to the region north of the Yellow River in the Central Plains of China
- (6) What I am translating as "Lion" is actually "Male Lion." But... it doesn't sound very cool in English so I will just leave it as "Lion."
- (7) What I translate as "overthrow him" literally means "to move the protection agency flag."
- (8) Die Wu's name in Chinese is 蝶舞 Dié wǔ. The first character is the character for "butterfly" and the second is "dance."
- (9) In Chinese just as in English, one of these guys has a normal name, and the other has the extremely strange and perhaps comical-sounding name "Wooden Chicken."
- (10) The cabbage references here is of course the classic "bai cai" or in Cantonese "bok choy."
- (11) Okay, the original text here uses some classic Chinese use of double negatives. Or triple? Or quadruple? Sima Chaoqun literally says, "The places that we haven't been too, the people who have been to those places are not very many." In Chinese it's pretty simple and direct, I think my English translation carries the succinctness.
- (12) As some of you know, in Chinese you can turn any word or phrase into an adjective very easily, but not so in English. As such, this passage was difficult to translate, but hopefully the meaning carries through.
- (13) What he is drinking is specifically a kind of alcohol called "shao dao zi." After some research I found out that this is basically a type of baijiu, which of course is the colorless distilled liquor that could probably be considered the national drink of China.
- (14) Guan Luo refers to a region in North China somewhere between Shaanxi and Luoyang. Later on you will find out that most of the story takes place in Chang'an and Luoyang.
- (15) The word here literally is "拜师" bai shi, which means for a person to formally bow before a master to become their pupil or disciple. It doesn't mention Sima Chaoqun by name, but for clarity's sake I'm adding his name

in there.

(16) The fifteenth day of the first month of the lunar calendar is Lantern Festival, or in Chinese “yuan xiao jie” and marks the official end of Spring Festival.

(17) Gao Jianfei’s name in Chinese is高渐飞 Gāo jiàn fēi. “Jian” means to do something gradually and “fei” means to fly.

CHAPTER X - AN IMPORTANT HEAD

Part 1

The sixteenth day of the first month of the lunar calendar.

Red Flower Bazaar.

Blowing snow filled the sky.

A galloping horse braved the snow gusts to charge toward the Red Flower Bazaar, which lay approximately fifty miles to the southwest of Chang'an city.

Lantern Festival had ended, the happy days had passed.

A dilapidated lantern rolled down the snow-filled street, pushed along by the never-ending cold wind. Even though it carried with it some of the feeling of the festivities of the previous night, at this point no one even glanced at it. It was like a woman doted upon for a night, then abandoned the next day.

The rider on the horse stopped outside of the bazaar and tied his horse to an old tree. He threw off his cloak, which was stitched from fine, expensive material, to reveal a padded jacket of blue brocade. He pulled out a hemp sack out from the saddle, along with an oilpaper umbrella and a set of cleats.

He donned the cleats, opened the oilskin umbrella and hoisted the hemp sack. He looked just like any other rich country folk.

Taking one careful step at a time, he entered the Red Flower Bazaar.

**

The hemp sack held a great secret inside, something that could shake heaven and earth. He knew what the secret was, only him.

He'd come here to deliver the item in the sack to a brothel in the Red Flower Bazaar, and to a specific person.

—What was in this sack? Who was it for?

If anyone knew the nature of this secret, he would in a split second be torn to pieces by blades, his father and mother, wife and children, all relatives, would be slaughtered within three days. His entire family would be wiped out.

Luckily, the secret would not be revealed. He would not reveal it, nor could anyone find out the secret.

Because no one could possibly have guessed that “Fierce Lion” Zhu Meng would have left his heavily fortified headquarters in Luoyang to charge alone into Sima Chaoqun’s territory.

Even Zhuo Donglai, who always thought of and planned for everything, would never imagine that Zhu Meng would dare to take such a risk.

Part 2

An unsophisticated little town, a simple and crude brothel.

Zhu Meng (1) sat bare-chested on the kang (2), wearing a pair of calf skin trousers, holding a large drinking bowl filled with the establishment’s finest wine. He was playing drinking games with seven or eight of the finest women, matching everyone bowl for bowl.

He was drinking fenjiu, and had already had already downed forty-three bowls (3). And yet, his face had not changed color at all.

This petrified the onlookers.

This burly, thickly-bearded man seemed to be forged from iron. Even his belly seemed to be forged from iron.

“Whose turn is it to drink?” Zhu Meng filled another bowl. “Who’s going to go up against me this time?”

No one was willing to compete with him. Even one of the bravest girls, who was from Shandong Province and had the nickname “Sea Bottle,” wasn’t willing to have another drink. (4)

Drunk customers were usually more generous, so the girls here were obviously expert drinkers.

“But this man...” Sea Bottle would later tell people. “He was simply inhuman! A wine keg, a bottomless wine keg.”

Zhu Meng tilted his head back and laughed, then drank down three large bowlsful. Suddenly, he took the thick, porcelain bowl and threw it to the ground, where it shattered into pieces. His copper-colored eyes shone with a look as sharp as a blade as he stared at a male slave who had just entered. The man stood with legs quivering.

“Is there someone outside?”

“Yes.”

“Looking for me?”

“Yes.” The slave’s voice was shaking. “He has a very strange name.”

“What’s his name?”

“His name is Cleats.”

Zhu Meng clapped his hands together. “Good boy. You’re finally here. Tell him to get the f*ck in here!”

**

“Cleats” took off his cleats and entered the room, carrying the hemp bag. The kang was full of fuel, and the room felt as warm as if it were springtime.
(5)

As soon as he entered, someone grabbed the bag from his hands and shook it. Something tumbled out, and rolled across the kang. A human head!

The girls were frightened to death, and the male slave urinated himself.

Zhu Meng laughed loudly.

“Good boy. I knew I hadn’t misjudged you. You really can take care of business for me. When we get back I’ll reward you with two concubines.”
(6)

His laughter stopped suddenly, and he stared at Cleats. In a low voice, he asked, “Did he say anything to you?”

“No,” replied Cleats. “The only thing I noticed was that he had some sort of box in his hand. I couldn’t even see his face clearly.”

A strange look shone in Zhu Meng’s eyes. He let out a soft sigh, and muttered, “You don’t owe me anything anymore. I just hope that you never come looking for me later to drink together.”

He obviously wasn’t talking to Cleats. And he obviously wasn’t used to heaving sighs.

So he laughed loudly again. “Zhuo Donglai, Zhuo Donglai. Everybody says you’re a freaking Zhuge Liang (7). Did you ever imagine I would be right next to your doghouse of a headquarters, drinking all night?” (8)

“Clan Leader, you always appear and disappear mysteriously when you have a mission. How could Mr. Zhuo possibly plan against you?” Cleats lowered his hands. “But he can surely figure out which path we will use to take Yang Jian’s head back to Luoyang. He’ll definitely arrange for ambushes and traps.”

“He might as well fart.” Zhu Meng glared at him. “If he doesn’t know that I’m right here, will he send his main force here?”

“He won’t.”

“Will he and Sima Chaoqun come?”

“They won’t.”

“So at the most, he might send along those two beardless brats. And he definitely wouldn’t send Guo Zhang, but Sun Tong.”

“Yes.” Cleats lowered his head. “It’s definitely him.”

He lowered his head because he didn’t want Zhu Meng to see the look of dread in his eyes.

He suddenly realized that this bearded, foul-mouthed man might appear to be crude and uneducated, but he was actually much more intelligent, and frightening, than anyone could imagine.

Zhu Meng suddenly jumped up, standing on the kang like some kind of celestial warrior. “Do you know who I am?” he shouted at the already terrified girls and the male slave.

No one dared to respond. No one dared even to open their mouth.

“I’m Great Granddaddy Zhu Meng!” He pointed at his nose with his thumb. “I’m Sima Chaoqun’s archenemy!”

He suddenly charged out into the next room and grabbed a bowl of ink from the counter. He dipped a brush into the ink until it was soaked through. In a flash, he had written ten characters onto the freshly white-washed wall, each character as large as a human head:

“Zhu Meng, the great hero of Luo Yang, was here!”

**

Ink dripped down the white-washed wall. Zhu Meng threw down the brush, laughing heartily.

“I’m here now, but it’s time to leave.” He thumped Cleats on the shoulder. “Let’s slaughter our way back, see if anyone can block our way.”

Part 3

Sun Tong actually shouldn't be called Sun Tong.

He should be called Sun Dang. (9)

Zhuo Donglai had praised him in front of people saying, "Even though Sun Tong is young, he can block the path of anyone. No matter what happens, he can block the path and keep it blocked."

On the main road leading out of Red Flower Bazaar, was a teahouse. If you sat at the table by the door of the teahouse, you could clearly see everyone passing by on the road.

Sun Tong sat in that exact position.

On either side of the road, standing underneath the eaves where the snow wasn't blowing, were two men wearing black clothes. They were older than Sun Tong, and had been working in the agency longer than him, yet they were his subordinates. These two men had been specially selected for this assignment. They had sharp gazes, and were experienced experts, yet Sun Tong was their superior in every way. Even they were thoroughly convinced of this.

They had been sent here because Sun Tong needed their sharp eyes and their experience to help him inspect every person coming and going from Red Flower Bazaar.

No matter who it was, if they looked even the slightest bit suspicious, or carried in their hand anything that seemed like it could contain a human head, or rode any type of vehicle that could hide a head, they would be stopped and thoroughly searched. Sometimes this type of search was embarrassing, but no one dared to refuse. This was because everyone knew that people sent by the "Great Protection Agency" were not to be offended.

Contrariwise, Sun Tong was not afraid to offend anyone.

He had received orders from Zhuo Donglai that regardless of the situation, he was not to allow Yang Jian's head to leave the vicinity of Chang'an.

Whenever carrying out Zhuo Donglai's orders, he was thorough and effective.

**

Sun Tong didn't pay the slightest attention to Little Gao as he left the Red Flower Bazaar,

After all, there was nowhere for him to conceal a head.

But Little Gao walked up to him and sat down across from him at the table, laughing. "What's your surname? What's your given name?"

Sun Tong didn't laugh, and yet didn't refuse to answer. "I'm surnamed Sun. Sun Tong."

"How are you?"

"Not very good, but not very bad," said Sun Tong coolly. "At least my head is still on my neck."

Little Gao gave a loud laugh.

"Knowing that your head is still on your neck really is something to be happy about. If you knew where Yang Jian's head was, you'd be even more happy."

"Do you know?"

"I only know that Mr. Zhuo won't want Yang Jian's head to fall into Zhu Meng's hands. He would definitely use it to show off to all his friends in Jianghu. And that's why you're here."

"It seems you know quite a bit."

"Unfortunately I still don't really understand. People going to Luo Yang might not necessarily take the main road. Even an out-of-towner like me knows of at least two or three side roads to take."

"I'm only watching the main road, not the side roads."

"Why?"

“People who take the side roads don’t have guts. They wouldn’t need me to handle them.”

“Well said! Very well said!”

Little Gao poured himself a cup of tea from Sun Tong’s teapot. He suddenly lowered his voice. “Have you seen anyone suspicious?”

“One person.”

“Who?”

“You.”

Little Gao laughed again. “If it was me, it wouldn’t bode well.”

“Bode well for who?”

“You!” Little Gao looked at Sun Tong. “If I was trying to escape with Yang Jian’s head, his Excellency would suddenly find that his Excellency’s head was not on his Excellency’s neck anymore.” He suddenly felt the need to explain. “When I say his Excellency, I mean you.”

Sun Tong wasn’t angry, and his facial expression didn’t change. He didn’t even blink.

“I can see that you don’t have Yang Jian’s head! But I can also see that you are carrying a sword.”

“You’re right.”

“Why don’t you draw your sword and test it out?”

“What do you mean test it out?”

“Test out whose head will fall off.”

Little Gao gently stroked the rough material that never left his side. He smiled and shook his head. “I can’t test it out. I definitely can’t.”

“You’re scared?”

"It's not that I'm scared, it's that I can't."

"Why?"

"Because this sword isn't made to use on you." With a very respectful tone of voice, he continued, "Because you aren't worthy."

**

Sun Tong's expression still hadn't changed, but his eyes had suddenly filled with red.

Many people look like this before they kill someone.

His hand had lowered, grasping the hilt of his sword, which rested on a stool next to him.

Little Gao stood up and turned away, preparing to leave. If he wanted to make a move, no one could stop him. If he didn't want to make a move, no one could force him to.

But before he could walk off, the thunderous sound of a galloping horse could be heard.

Another sound could be heard amidst the sound of the horse hooves, a sound that might be made by someone wearing cleats, running along ice and snow.

He had just differentiated between these two sounds when suddenly he caught sight of a horse charging down the street.

On the horse was a rider with a thick beard, wearing an unfastened sheepskin coat. The sharp, icy wind battered his chest, yet he seemed not to notice.

Behind the horse was another person, wearing a pair of oilskin cleats. With one hand he grasped the horse's tail, and in the other he held a bamboo pole, affixed to the end of which was a hemp sack. He dashed along behind the horse, shouting, "Yang Jian's head is right here. This is the end fate of a traitor!"

The man on the horse laughed, a crazy laugh, so loud that the eaves shook, dropping sheet after sheet of snow onto the ground.

**

Little Gao definitely wasn't going to leave.

He had never seen Zhu Meng before, but he knew this was him.

Other than "Fierce Lion" Zhu Meng, who else could be so impressive and awe-inspiring?

He had never imagined that Zhu Meng would appear here, but he really hoped that Sun Tong would let him pass.

Because he saw that in Zhu Meng's hand was an enormous gold-inlaid broadsword. (10)

The broadsword was nearly five feet long and was wider than a butcher's chopping block. The blade tip was thinner than paper.

Sun Tong was still young.

Little Gao really didn't want to see someone so young beheaded and trampled by a horse.

But sadly, Sun Tong had already begun moving forward, his sword shining like white snow. He leaped up from behind the table, the light from his sword glimmering like a rainbow as it flew toward Zhu Meng's throat.

This attack was like a gambler's last gambit, in which you put everything on the line in one move.

It was a fatal attack, fatal either to your opponent, or yourself.

Zhu Meng laughed wildly. "You've really got guts, kid."

As he laughed, he raised his broadsword high. The gold glowed, the blade edge shone like the moon. The dazzling brightness of the reflected snow pierced the eyes like needles.

Little Gao saw the blade flash, and then suddenly everything turned scarlet.

Bright red droplets of blood splattered everywhere, as if fireworks had splashed out from within the shining light of the sword and intermixed with the silvery, white snow to create a painting that once gazed upon could never be forgotten.

The beauty was indescribable. It was a beauty filled with sadness, filled with cruelty, filled with heroic tragedy.

In this moment, it seemed as if all the living creatures in the world were shocked into motionlessness from the beauty of it.

Little Gao felt as though his heart had stopped beating, and that he couldn't breathe.

Even though it had only taken a split second to happen, it seemed as if that split second lasted an eternity.

In heaven and on earth, only "death" lasts an eternity.

**

The horse continued galloping, and Cleats still ran along behind it. They had gone nearly sixty meters before Sun Tong's corpse landed on the frozen ground, ground as cold and unfeeling as the blade of the broadsword.

Hundreds of thousands of tiny drops of blood slowly descended along with the snowflakes.

Bright red droplets of blood, shining white snowflakes.

The galloping horse let out a long neigh and reared up. Cleats seemed to float up as well.

Zhu Meng reigned in the horse, spun it around, and galloped back. Cleats flew along behind the horse like a kite.

The two black-clothed men stood on either side of the road, their broadswords drawn. The blades glinted as brightly as Zhu Meng's, but their eyes and their faces were the color of dead ashes.

Zhu Meng laughed.

“Look closely. I’m Zhu Meng. I’m leaving you with your heads so that you can have a good look at me, then go back and tell Sima and Zhuo Donglai that I was here. I’m going now. It doesn’t matter if I’m in a dragon’s cave or a tiger’s den, if I feel like coming, I’ll come, if I feel like going, I’ll go.” Then he shouted, “Why haven’t you gotten lost yet?”

The black-clothed men were already falling back. As soon as they heard him start to shout, they began running away, running faster than horses.

Zhu Meng was about to laugh, but didn’t, because he suddenly heard someone sigh and say, “I have to say, there really are not very many people in the world like Sun Tong who aren’t afraid to die.”

Part 4

Little Gao had already sat down in the seat moments ago occupied by Sun Ping. He picked up the scabbard Sun Ping had dropped and put it onto the table along with his own cloth-wrapped sword. He didn’t look directly at Zhu Meng, but he could tell that Zhu Meng’s expression had changed.

Then he found that Zhu Meng was in front of him, perched high on the horse, staring at him with his sharp, copper-colored eyes.

Little Gao didn’t look at him.

He took a drink of tea.

But the tea in the cup was cold, so he emptied the cup and poured another. He emptied that one onto the ground too. The tea in the teapot was cold, yet he unexpectedly poured another cup.

Zhu Meng continued to stare at him, and then asked in a loud voice, “What are you doing?!”

“I’m drinking tea,” said Little Gao. “I’m thirsty, so I want to drink tea.”

“But you’re not drinking.”

“Because the tea is cold,” said Little Gao. “I never drink cold tea.” He sighed. “If I’m drinking alcohol I don’t care. I can drink any type of alcohol, but with tea I’m very picky. Cold tea is absolutely undrinkable. I would rather drink poisoned wine.”

“Don’t tell me you think that you’re going to get hot tea from that pot?” asked Zhu Meng.

“That’s exactly what I’m thinking.”

“Can’t you tell that the tea in the pot is completely cold?”

“I know. Of course I know.”

Zhu Meng looked at him as if he were some type of freak. “You know that the tea in the pot is cold, but you still think you can pour a cup of hot tea out of it?”

“Not just hot, scalding hot. The more boiling hot it is, the better the tea tastes.”

Zhu Meng suddenly laughed, then turned and looked at Cleats. “At first I wanted to chop this kid’s head off, but now I can’t.” He laughed loudly. “He’s crazy, and I never chop off the heads of crazy people.”

Cleats didn’t laugh, because just now he caught sight of something very strange.

He saw Little Gao pouring a cup of hot tea from the cold teapot. It was so hot that it bubbled and steamed.

Zhu Meng’s laughter suddenly ceased as he saw the same thing.

Not many people could laugh after seeing something like this. And not many people could control their internal force and heat to warm a pot of cold tea.

Zhu Meng looked back at Cleats. “Is this kid crazy or not?”

“Looks like he’s not.”

“It looks like he has some freaking kung fu, after all. At least a little.”

“Looks like he does.”

“Who would ever have thought he was a good kid? I almost missed it.”
When he was finished speaking, he did something no one could ever have imagined that he would do.

He suddenly dismounted, stuck his broadsword into the ground, and walked up to Xiao Gao. Cupping one fist in the other, he saluted him in dead earnest and said, “You’re not crazy. You’re a true man. If you’re willing to be brothers, and you’re willing to go back with me to Luoyang and drink for a few days, I will kneel in front of you and kowtow three times.”

Experts filled the “Lion Clan” like clouds filled the sky. Fierce Lion Zhu Meng had won fame throughout the region of Luoyang. Considering his position, how could he kiss the butt of a nameless, down-and-out youth? And yet, it seemed he was not joking at all.

Little Gao looked shocked. He stared for a long time before finally sighing and smiling wryly. “Now I can finally believe that what people say in Jianghu is real. Fierce Lion Zhu Meng really is an extraordinary character. No wonder so many people admire you and are willing to die for you.”

“And you?” asked Zhu Meng. “Are you willing to make friends with Zhu Meng?”

Little Gao slapped the table. “Ah what the hell?” he said loudly. “Let’s be friends. What’s the big deal?” His voice was even louder than Zhu Meng’s. “I’m Gao Jianfei, and in my months of wandering Jianghu, I haven’t met anyone who treats me with respect. Why shouldn’t I make friends with you?”

Zhu Meng turned his head back and laughed. “Great! Very well said!”

“But, as for the kowtowing, let’s scrap that part. If you kneel in front of me, I couldn’t stay standing. If both of us kneel and kowtow, you kowtow to me, I kowtow to you, then doesn’t that make us a pair of click beetles?(11) I don’t want to do that.”

Zhu Meng agreed. “If you say we don’t do it, then we don’t do it.”

"I also can't go back with you to drink, because I have an appointment with death in Chang'an."

"Well, let's drink here, then! Drink it up!"

"Drink here?" Little Gao frowned. "Aren't you afraid Sima might show up?"

Zhu Meng slapped the table hard.

"Aw hell, even if he does show up, what's the big deal? At the most I might lose my life in a fight to the death. What else could he do? But as for this round of drinks between us, we have to drink them. Not drinking will be worse than dying!"

"Ok! Let's drink," said Little Gao. "If you're not scared, what the hell do I have to be scared of?"

**

The teahouse not only was devoid of customers, the wait staff had also left.

Thankfully, the wine jugs were still there.

Zhu Meng and Little Gao drank together. Cleats poured the wine. They drank faster than he could pour, and yet before they could finish the jug, the sound of horse hooves drifted in from outside.

The hoofbeats sounded like the beating of drums. There were at least sixty or seventy horses.

Red Flower Bazaar was within Sima Chaoqun's sphere of influence. If someone received orders from Sima to tear the entire place to the ground, it would happen in an instant, and that was not an exaggeration.

But Zhu Meng didn't even blink. He had a full bowl of wine in his hand, and not a drop spilled out.

"Let me toast you three more times," he said to Little Gao. "I wish you health, happiness and longevity!" (12)

"Okay. Drink!"

He drank quickly, but the hoofbeats seemed to sound out ever more urgently. By the third bowl, it was like thunder.

Cleats' hands, which held the wine jug, seemed to be weakening, but Zhu Meng's expression hadn't changed.

"Now it's time for you to toast me," he said to Little Gao. "You have to toast me at least three times."

Cleats suddenly interrupted, "Clan Leader, I'm afraid you won't be able to finish all three bowls."

"Why not?" Zhu Meng was furious. "Why can't we?"

"Clan Leader, if you keep drinking, the life of young master Gao as well as your life will be at risk."

Zhu Meng's anger dissipated and he let out a long sigh. "What he said is true. Risking my life isn't a big deal, but why involve you?"

He made to stand up, but Little Gao grabbed his shoulder and casually said, "My life isn't worth as much as yours. If you're willing to risk yours, why can't I? Besides, who's to say we might not come out on top?"

Zhu Meng laughed heartily. "True. What you said is even more true."

"So, let me toast you these three bowls. I also wish you health, happiness and longevity."

They laughed together, and as they laughed the sound of horses had reached the tea house and completely surrounded it. It sounded like a thunderstorm.

And then the sound of hoofbeats suddenly ceased. There were a few neighs, and then complete silence.

Everything was suddenly as quiet as death. The teahouse seemed like a tomb. Cleats suddenly sat down. With a bitter laugh, he said, "Clan Leader, I'd like to have a little wine."

Part 5

There was no sound of blades, no sound of swords, no sound of people, no sound of horses.

Because every person and every horse had been through years of rigorous training, and when necessary, could be completely noiseless. Even if their head were chopped off, they wouldn't utter a sound.

Within the deathlike silence a man walked in, his hands clasped behind his back. He wore a violet crown and a violet, sable cloak.

"Eastern Violet Clouds" Zhuo Donglai had arrived. (13)

**

His bearing was extremely calm and collected. Only a person who knows that they are in complete control and have the upper hand, could display this level of calmness.

The lives of the three people in the teahouse were definitely under his control.

But Little Gao and Zhu Meng didn't even look at him.

"I have to toast you three more times," said Little Gao. "For these three, I wish you long life and riches, many sons and grandsons." Before he had finished pouring the wine, Zhuo Donglai was standing in front of them.

"Shouldn't these three bowls be mine to toast with?" he said calmly.

"Why?"

"Clan Leader Zhu has traveled from far away. We haven't fulfilled our duty as a host at all. These three bowls should definitely be mine to toast with."

Zhu Meng said nothing. He simply downed the three bowls. Zhuo Donglai downed his just as quickly.

"I must toast Clan Leader Zhu three more. These three are an absolute necessity."

“Why?”

“Because after these three bowls, there’s a matter I need to consult with Clan Leader Zhu about.”

“What matter?”

Zhuo Donglai first drank three bowls. “Clan Leader Zhu’s whereabouts are always uncertain. He comes and goes like a shadow. As far as he’s concerned, this place is completely deserted.” He sighed. “So, if Clan Leader Zhu had left just now, we would have been powerless to stop him.” He lifted his head up and looked at Zhu Meng coldly. “And yet, Clan Leader Zhu didn’t leave just now.”

“You didn’t anticipate that?”

“Not at all!”

“Actually, neither did I. Because before, I hadn’t made this new friend.” Zhu Meng slapped Little Gao’s shoulder. “But now we’re friends. Of course I have to have a few drinks with him. He couldn’t go with me back to Luoyang, the least I could do is stay behind to accompany him.” Zhu Meng laughed. “It’s really very simple. I’m just afraid people like you won’t be able to understand.”

Zhuo Donglai didn’t say anything. He didn’t make a sound, didn’t move, didn’t sigh, didn’t drink.

It suddenly seemed as if he turned into a piece of wood. Even his eyes had no expression in them.

There was no movement from outside. Without orders from Zhuo Donglai, no one would be willing to move.

Time passed.

As the time passed, what were Little Gao and Zhu Meng doing? Zhuo Donglai didn’t seem to know, or care.

**

As the time passed, only Little Gao's face had any expression on it. It was a very strange expression.

From the expression on his face, it seemed as if a handful of scorpions or bedbugs were wriggling around in his clothes, and that he couldn't hold back from moving.

Actually, he had caught sight of something no one else could see. Because of the direction his seat was facing, he could look directly at a window in the back of the room. And that window happened to be open.

Outside this window could be seen the horses brought along by Zhuo Donglai. But from Little Gao's angle, he could see through a small space between the men and horses and blades and arrows. He could see a tree.

It was a dead, withered poplar tree, and standing beneath it was a person.

From his seat, Little Gao could clearly see the person.

It was a quiet, ordinary person, carrying an old-fashioned, ordinary box.

Little Gao felt the urge to charge out the door, felt multiple urges, but he didn't move.

Because he knew that now was a decisive moment. The lives and fates of all of them would be decided in just a moment, and anything he did could cause harm to his friend.

So he didn't move.

But he really hoped that the box-carrying man under the tree wouldn't leave.

A long time passed, and then he saw another very strange thing.

He suddenly saw Zhuo Donglai smile.

And he suddenly realized that Zhuo Donglai's smile was actually very charming.

He saw Zhuo Donglai smile and stand up, then give an elegant and formal bow to Zhu Meng.

“Clan Leader Zhu, I won’t toast you anymore. It’s a long way back to Luoyang, and it’s not good to drink too much.”

Little Gao was shocked, as was Zhu Meng.

“You’re letting him go?” asked Little Gao. “You’re really letting him go?”

Zhuo Donglai smiled coldly. “If you’re able to make friends with him, why can’t I? He’s willing to risk his life to drink with you, why can’t I let him go?”

And then he personally led Zhu Meng’s horse over by the reigns. “Clan Leader Zhu, we’ll part here. We’ll meet again someday. Please forgive me for not seeing you further along.”

**

Dust roiled. A horse, a horsetail, a pair of cleats, and two people raced away.

Little Gao watched them leave, then turned and asked Zhuo Donglai, “Now I can finally believe that what people say in Jianghu is real. ‘Eastern Violet Clouds’ Zhuo Donglai really is an extraordinary character.”

Zhuo Donglai sighed again. “Unfortunately, you’re not going to make friends with me. Because you want to become famous, you want Sima Chaoqun to die by your sword.”

Little Gao was silent for a long time before saying, “Maybe the person to die won’t be him, but me.”

“Yes. The person to die will very likely be you,” Zhuo Donglai said coldly. “If I was going to place a bet, I would bet ten to one that you’ll die.” He looked at Little Gao. “If you want to place a bet with me, I’m willing.”

“No thanks.”

“Why not?”

“Because I can’t afford to lose.”

As soon as the words left his mouth, he dashed out. All of a sudden, he had noticed that the man standing beneath the tree had disappeared.

This time, Little Gao was determined to pursue him.

**

- (1) The “meng” character in Zhu Meng’s name is the character for “fierce, violent, energetic, vigorous.”
- (2) A kang is a traditional sleeping bed made of bricks or clay. It has a type of furnace or oven underneath that can be heated up during winter to make the bed and the room warm.<http://goo.gl/ad6oSn>
- (3) Fenjiu is a relatively famous type of bai jiu from Shanxi. <http://goo.gl/T7Xrt0>
- (4) Her name implies that she can drink a lot.
- (5) The original text includes the tidbit that the fuel being used is horse manure.
- (6) In this part of the story, Zhu Meng consistently refers to himself as 老子 laozi. This literally means “old man” or “daddy,” and it is something that tough guys will often say to their inferiors (or to others, when trying to make themselves sound tough, or to insult people). But it’s not very common to refer to yourself in the third person in English, and even the common translation “daddy,” just doesn’t sound right in my opinion, so I’m going to leave it out. However, throughout the story, I will clarify as necessary whether or not it is being used.
- (7) Zhuge Liang is of course the most famous strategist in the history of China. <http://goo.gl/gZfi>
- (8) He literally just says the word “doghouse,” but he’s referring to their organizations base of operations, so I added “headquarters” to make it flow a bit smoother.
- (9) This is a play on the two Chinese character 通 tong and 挡 dang. Tong means to pass, or to let pass, and dang means to block or stop.
- (10) This type of weapon is a 砍刀 kan dao, which could also be translated as chopper or chopping sword.
- (11) The name for click beetle in Chinese is literally “kowtowing bug.” <http://goo.gl/1jKYYG>
- (12) As I mentioned before, Zhuo Donglai’s given name means “from the east.” So his Jianghu nickname actually contains the same two characters as his given name. “紫气东来” 卓东来 or “ziqu donglai” zhuo donglai. And as I mentioned before I’m going to continue to use violet instead of purple. Even though the Chinese character is the same throughout the story, the things being described are often not purple. Furthermore, I think violet sounds more cool than purple. Haha.
- (13) At this point, until further notice, Zhu Meng has stopped referring to himself as “laozi” and is now using the normal word for “I” or “me.”
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CHAPTER 3 – SURPRISE ATTACK

Part 1

The seventeenth day of the first month of the lunar calendar.

Chang'an.

Early morning, bitter cold.

When Zhuo Donglai got out of bed, Sima Chaoqun was already in his small outer room, waiting. He sat on the violet sable-skin covered seat, drinking red wine from the crystal cup.

Sima Chaoqun was the only person who could do this. One time a girl, thinking Zhuo Donglai couldn't bear to part with her, had sat down on his chair. She ended up being thrown outside naked into the snow.

Everything that belonged to Zhuo Donglai was completely off-limits to others, with Sima Chaoqun being the only exception.

But, Zhuo Donglai made him wait outside for a long time before draping a long, wide robe over himself and walking barefoot out of the bedroom. The first thing he said was, "You're here so early. Are you anxious to know why I let Zhu Meng go yesterday?"

"Yes. I know you have a reason, but I just can't figure it out."

Zhuo Donglai sat down on folded violet sable skin. Usually when in Sima's presence, he would be immaculately dressed, and would act extremely respectful and formal. He never sat with him as an equal.

This was because he wanted others to view Sima Chaoqun as someone above the masses.

But now, in his own room, there were only the two of them.

"I couldn't kill Zhu Meng," said Zhuo Donglai. "First of all, because I didn't want to. Second of all, I wasn't confident I would succeed."

"Why didn't you want to kill him?"

"He rode his horse alone into our territory, calmly beheaded one of our high-ranking officers, and could have gotten away with no problem. Instead, he stayed behind to drink with a friend. If I killed him," he said coolly, "people in Jianghu would forever say that 'Fierce Lion' Zhu Meng really is worthy to be called a courageous man, a true friend and brother." He laughed coldly. "Wouldn't killing him be helping him to achieve his goals?"

Sima Chaoqun gazed at the wine in the crystal cup. "I knew you would have a reason, but I can't figure out why you wouldn't be confident. You took a lot of men with you, experts. You really couldn't handle three people?"

"It wasn't three, it was four."

"Who was the fourth person?"

"I couldn't see. But I could sense him standing outside the window behind me. Even though he stood far away outside, it was as if I could feel him breathing down my neck."

"Why?"

"He carries an aura of death. In my whole life, I've never felt such a horrible deathly aura."

"You didn't turn around to look at him?"

"No. I knew he was staring at me the whole time, and it felt as if he were giving me some kind of warning. If I made the slightest move, no matter what it was, he would attack. And even though I didn't see him, Gao Jianfei did."

"How do you know?"

"Gao Jianfei was sitting across from me, facing the window. As soon as I felt the aura of death, Gao Jianfei's face suddenly changed. It looked as if he'd suddenly seen a ghost." He continued, "Of the new generation of

swordsmen, Gao Jianfei is definitely the greatest master. Unless there was some special reason, why would he be so terrified of a stranger?"

Sima Chaoqun suddenly let out a laugh. A hearty laugh.

"And so you were also scared." His laughter was full of derision. "I never thought that when the day came that Eastern Violet Clouds Zhuo Donglai felt scared, he would be scared of someone he couldn't even see."

Zhuo Donglai looked at him stonily. He waited for him to finish laughing before calmly continuing, "Even though I couldn't see him, I knew who he was."

"Who was he? Don't tell me he's the assassin who killed Yang Jian?"

"Yes. That's exactly who he was. This person is familiar with Jianghu, and whoever he is, he definitely has some special relationship with Zhu Meng. And yet, he isn't Zhu Meng's subordinate. He uses some kind of incredibly fearsome weapon that no one has ever seen, something that can unleash the power of multiple weapons."

"What else?" asked Sima Chaoqun.

"Nothing else."

"This is all you know?"

"This is all I know for now. I don't even know what the general shape of the weapon is. But," he said coolly, "this little bit I know is more than most people know."

Sima Chaoqun wanted to laugh, but couldn't.

Zhuo Donglai was his friend, a friend with whom he had shared many life and death struggles. Zhuo Dong Lai was also his most capable assistant.

But no one would guess that when they were alone together he and Zhuo Donglai would be diametrically opposed. It was as if he looked for every opportunity to hurt his friend.

Zhuo Donglai never fought back, never even offered up any sort of reaction.

Sima Chaoqun drank another glass of wine. Then he asked, “Sun Tong is dead. What about Guo Zhuang?”

“Guo Zhuang is gone.”

“I saw him yesterday morning. Why is he gone?”

“Because early yesterday morning I had already told him to get to Luo Yang as quickly as possible. If he travels at double speed around the clock, he should be able to get there one day before Zhu Meng arrives.”

Sima Chaoqun’s eyes shone. “He can definitely get there on time?”

“Definitely.”

“What if he doesn’t?”

“Then I sent him to Luoyang to his death. He won’t be returning.”

Sima Chaoqun didn’t ask Zhuo Donglai why he sent Gao Zhuang to Luoyang, or what he would do there.

He didn’t need to ask.

He already understood Zhuo Donglai’s plan, and his actions.

—With Zhu Meng returning from so far away, his officers would surely meet him somewhere on the road to accompany him. The men left behind to defend the “Lion Clan” headquarters would definitely be off guard. It was a perfect opportunity to launch a surprise attack.

—As long as it really was at the right time, one surprise attack would be more effective than ten bitter battles in the open.

This was Zhuo Donglai’s preferred strategy.

This plan was definitely vicious and bold, it really was Zhuo Donglai’s style.

Sima Chaoqun’s next question was, “You only sent one person? Gao Zhuang?”

"We have people in Luoyang," said Zhuo Donglai. "And Gao Zhuang didn't go alone."

"Who else went?"

"Wooden Chicken."

"Wooden Chicken?" Sima Chaoqun looked surprised. "You didn't kill him?"

"He's a useful person, even to us. Why would I kill him?"

"Aren't you worried the people Zhu Meng sent to kill Yang Jian might betray us?"

"The person he wants to kill now isn't Yang Jian, it's Zhu Meng."

"Why?"

"Because he knows that Zhu Meng was just using him, using him as a distraction, deliberately sending him to his death. He knows that Zhu Meng never intended for him to succeed. He doesn't mind being used by people, but he can't take being insulted." Zhuo Donglai continued, "In any case, I'm paying him much more than Zhu Meng paid him."

Sima Chaoqun looked at him, his eyes filling with a derisive smile.

"And now I know why you didn't kill Zhu Meng. You want him to live so that he can see with his own eyes the bitter lesson you've prepared. You want him to know how powerful you are." He looked at Zhuo Donglai smiling. "You've always been this way. You just want people to be more and more frightened of you."

"Correct. I want Zhu Meng to be frightened. So frightened that he will never again do something stupid. However, the person I want him to be afraid of isn't me, it's you." His voice became soft. "Other than us, no one knows that this plan was executed by me and not you."

Sima leaped up, his veins on his forehead pulsing.

“But I know!” he shouted. “You do something like this, how could you not even mention it to me? Not even ask me about it? Why do you wait until it’s already done before telling me?”

Zhuo Donglai’s bearing was still as calm as before. He gazed at Sima Chaoqun softly.

“Because you don’t like to do things this way. You like to accomplish big things, be a big hero in Jianghu, make great achievements in the martial world.”

Sima clenched his fists and glared at him. After a long time, he let out a sigh and loosened his fists.

Having already stood up, he slowly turned to leave.

“Gao Jianfei is still in the Chang’an area,” Zhuo Donglai said. “He’s waiting for your response. Are you ready for the duel?”

Sima Chaoqun didn’t look back.

“Whatever you want,” he said, his voice empty. “I know that you’ve already planned everything out. Whenever the duel is, he won’t stand a chance, because you won’t give him a chance. So,” he continued coldly, “you don’t need to ask me about it again.”

Part 2

When Gao Jianfei woke up, his hands and feet were almost frozen solid.

His cramped room at the cheap inn had a small brazier in it, but the charcoal had long since burned out.

He stood up in the bed and performed six or seven very strange movements, his body seemingly following his thoughts to twist and distort like a noodle. After he reached the eleventh position, his body was beginning to feel warm, and by the time he finished, his spirit was roused, his face glowed, and his mood very happy.

He fully believed that today he would be able to find the person carrying the solitary box.

After leaving the teahouse last night, he'd seen the person three times. Once next to a small frozen brook; once at the foot of a hill; and once in a small, dirty Chang'an alley.

He'd seen very clearly.

Even though up to now he hadn't seen the person's face, he had very clearly seen his gray, cotton robe and the solitary brown, oxblood box.

Unfortunately, every time he caught sight of the man, he would disappear like air.

So he'd decided to cease his pursuit, and come back to sleep for a bit.

He'd come to the realization that this person wanted to meet him, too. Otherwise he wouldn't have appeared three times.

The man was definitely feeling him out, testing his martial arts, getting a sense of his intentions.

Little Gao felt convinced that even if he didn't continue his pursuit, the man would show his face sooner or later.

It had stopped snowing, but the weather was even colder than before. Little Gao decided that he needed to eat some hot noodle soup.

Once he reached the little noodle shop he frequented, he saw the man with the solitary box. As expected.

It wasn't lunch time yet, so there weren't very many customers in the little shop.

The person sat in the same corner Little Gao usually sat in, quietly eating a bowl of noodles, the same type of noodles Little Gao usually ate.

His box sat next to him. It was a flat, solitary box, about one foot wide and two feet long.

—What rested inside this solitary box? How could such an ordinary box be the most fearsome weapon under heaven?

**

Little Gao wanted to dash forward and grab it, then open it up and take a look.

But, he restrained himself.

No matter what happened, this time he would finally get to see the person's face clearly.

It was a flat, waxen yellow face with a pair dull expressionless eyes and a listless air. This person looked as if he had been afflicted with some sort of serious disease for many years, and could pass away at any moment. (1)

Even though there were many open seats in the noodle shop, Little Gao summoned up his courage, walked forward, and sat down across from the person. He ordered a bowl of noodles, and then said, "I'm surnamed Gao, like from the expression 'High Mountains and Flowing Waters.' (2) My full name is Gao Jianfei. As in, I want to gradually fly up into the air.(3)"

The person had no reaction at all, as if they hadn't even noticed someone had sat down in front of them.

The dark brown, oxhide box sat on the other side of the table. Little Gao could just reach out his hand and grab it.

If he really reached out and grabbed the box, then ran away, what would happen?

Little Gao wasn't willing to try.

He was a courageous person, and there weren't many things under heaven that he wouldn't try.

But this seemingly sick, dying person seemed to have some sort of unfathomable power that made people incapable of making any move to annoy or encroach upon him.

Little Gao stared at him for a long time, then lowered his voice so that no one else could hear, and said, "I know who you are. I know that you killed Yang Jian."

The person finally lifted their head and looked at him, his previously expressionless eyes suddenly flashing. It was as if lightning had suddenly fallen from a murky gray sky.

And yet after the lightning fell, no sound of thunder rang out.

The listless expression returned. He slowly put some coins onto the table, lifted up the box, and left.

Little Gao followed.

Surprisingly, the person didn't vanish like he had the previous three times.

He walked ahead, very slowly, as if afraid that Little Gao couldn't keep up.

After walking for a long time, Little Gao suddenly realized that they had returned to the same little dirty alley as the night before.

There was nobody in the alley, which was actually a dead end.

Little Gao's heart suddenly began to beat harder and harder.

—Could it be that because he knew the man's secret, he'd brought him here to silence him using his mysterious box?

Little Gao didn't know what kind of weapon this box was, and he didn't know if he would be able to use the sword in his hand to defend against it.

And because of this lack of knowledge, his heart filled with a kind of dread that he had never felt before.

But, it didn't seem that the person planned to kill him. He didn't look like he could kill anybody, actually.

He turned around and faced Little Gao. A long time passed. Then he spoke, in a mild, hoarse voice. "Do you know who I am?"

“No.”

“Before the 15th day of the lunar calendar, had you ever seen me?”

“No.”

“Do I look like someone who can kill people?”

“No.”

“Have you ever seen me kill anyone?”

“No.”

“Then why do you think I killed Yang Jian?”

“Because of your box,” said Little Gao. “I know that there’s a mysterious, fearsome weapon in it.”

The person stared at him.

Little Gao’s expression, bearing, posture, breath rate, the material of his clothing, the cloth-wrapped sword in his hand, every part of his person from top to bottom, was taken in by his gaze.

His gaze appeared to be more attentive than Zhuo Donglai’s, and the gray, expressionless eyes seemed to contain the ability to see any type of secret hidden weapon a person might be concealing.

He used the same mild, raspy voice to ask Little Gao, “You said your name is Gao Jianfei?”

“Yes.”

“Where are you from?”

“A mountain.”

“Was it a very high mountain? The place you lived, did it have a cool spring and an ancient pine tree?”

“Yes.”

“The clothes you’re wearing, are they made from hemp that you grew on the mountain and spun into cloth?”

“Yes.”

Little Gao was very surprised. This man seemed to know more about him than anyone.

“Was there an old man on this mountain who loved to drink tea?” he asked Little Gao. “He liked to sit underneath the ancient pine and make tea with the spring water?”

“Yes,” said Little Gao. “He was the one that told me about this solitary box.”

“And did he tell you about me?”

“No.”

He stared at Little Gao, his dark gray eyes flashing. “He never mentioned me? Not even one time?”

“Never. He just told me that the most fearsome weapon in the world is a solitary box.”

“Did you tell anyone else about this?”

“No.”

“Does anybody know about your past?”

“No. Zhuo Donglai tried to investigate my clothing. He thought he could figure out where I came from by analyzing the material. But he couldn’t figure out a thing.”

He had grown the hemp himself, weaved the fabric himself, sewn the clothing himself. The mountain was not famous; other than he and the old man, no one had ever set foot on it.

Little Gao laughed. "Even though Zhuo Donglai has some amazing abilities, he couldn't figure out anything about my past."

"And your sword?" the person asked. "Has anyone seen your sword?"

"A few people."

"A few people? What kind of people?"

"A few dead people. Everyone who has seen this sword of mine has ended up dying under it."

"Is there something special about your sword?"

"There is."

"What?"

"On the back of the blade are some strange marks. They look like exactly like tearstains."

**

A strange and mysterious look suddenly filled the eyes of the person with the box.⁽⁴⁾ The expression was indescribable, as if it were filled with both sorrow and happiness.

"Tearstains, tearstains," he said quietly. "So it turns out this sword really does exist. Why does a killer's sword have tearstains on it? Why does the world have a sword like this?"

Little Gao didn't know how to answer.

It was a really strange question, and perhaps no one could provide an answer.

Little Gao couldn't hold back from asking, "So, can you finally tell me who you are? How do you know so much about me?"

The person said nothing. He placed his thumb and first finger into his mouth, and a piercing sound rang out.

Little Gao suddenly heard the sound of carriage wheels and horse hooves.

He turned around and caught sight of a black horse and carriage, waiting just outside the dirty alley.

The man with the box walked over, opened the carriage door, and sat down. Then he looked at Little Gao. "Are you getting in?"

—Where did this carriage come from?

Little Gao didn't know.

—Where was the carriage going?

Little Gao didn't know.

But he got in. Even if he knew that the carriage had come from hell, and would deliver him back to hell, he would still get it.

Part 3

The inside of the carriage was spacious, comfortable and luxurious. Its moved extremely quickly and stably; the four horses that pulled it, as well as the driver, had all received excellent training. The yoke and the carriage itself were extremely well constructed; even the stable of a wealthy nobleman wouldn't have a carriage as fine as this.

How could this ordinary looking person, wearing homespun clothes, have such a resplendent carriage?

Little Gao had many questions he wanted to ask, but as soon as he entered the carriage, the man closed his eyes and fell fast asleep.

The mysterious box sat next to him.

Little Gao's heart starting pounding again.

—What would happen if I just opened it and took a quick look? Even if I took a look and he noticed, it wouldn't be a big deal.

The temptation was just too much, too much for anyone to resist.

Little Gao couldn't hold back any more. He reached out his hand.

His hands were extremely dexterous, and had received extremely strict training. One time during a test, he had picked eleven locks crafted by different master craftsmen, all in a row.

Most people would have a hard time opening those locks even if they had the key, but all he used was a slender metal wire.

He quickly found the lock spring; a “geng” sound could be heard as it released.

The owner of the box still slept soundly.

—What exactly was in the box? Why was it the most fearsome weapon in the world?

The secret would finally be revealed. Little Gao's heart beat faster and faster.

Slowly and carefully, he opened the lid. Inside were a set of strangely shaped metal tubes and pieces. There seemed to be about thirteen of them, each one a different size and shape.

Unfortunately, Little Gao couldn't see them all clearly.

When the box opened, he suddenly caught scent of a fragrance like that of jasmine.

And then he passed out.

**

(1) The narrative literally says that it looked like the person had been sick with a disease for 17 or 18 years.

(2) This is a Chinese idiom which contains the same character “Gao” as his surname. Here is a link if you’d like to learn more about it: <http://goo.gl/05FtNo>

(3) Don’t forget that the character from his name “jian” means “gradually” and “fei” means to fly.

(4) As I’m sure most of you know, Chinese contains measure words for everything. Sometimes Gu Long uses the measure word for box to describe it specifically as ONE box. It’s in these situations that I’m describing it as the solitary box. Other times he leaves out the measure word and just describes it as a box.

CHAPTER 4 – AN EXTRAORDINARY PERSON, AN EXTRAORDINARY PLACE, EXTRAORDINARY THINGS

Part 1

The 18th day of the first month of the lunar calendar.

A place no one knew about.

How could a bunch of randomly shaped metal parts be the most fearsome weapon in the world?

**

Little Gao hadn't completely regained consciousness yet, but this question was still wrapped around his heart like a poisonous snake.

When he finally completely regained his senses, he was frightened into silence by the sight in front of his eyes.

He suddenly found that he was in a place that could only exist in the most bizarre dreamscape.

It seemed like a mountainside cave, but Little Gao couldn't be sure. Whoever arrived here would have the same reaction as he, and be entranced.

He had never seen a place with so many amazing and fascinating things.

Light emanated from multi-colored, Persian crystal lamps, illuminating enormous, bizarrely-shaped stalactites. Gand-made, finely decorated rugs, strange and beautiful, covered the floor. Strange weapons hung on four sets of wooden racks. Sevearl of them, Little Gao had never seen before, or even heard of.

There was also a piece of coral nearly nine feet tall, several elephant tusks about three feet long each, a horse carved from flawless white jade, a collection of various plants, fruits and vegetables made from jadeite and agate, and a huge golden Buddha from Siam, draped with strings of jewels, sparkling and shining, as large as lychees.(1)

Furthermore, on a large table were laid out jade and gold drinking vessels as well as crystal bottles, filled with fine alcohols from every corner of the earth.

Standing next to the soft bed where Little Gao lay, were four exceedingly beautiful women wearing gauze gowns as diaphanous as cicada wings. They looked at Little Gao, giggling. One of the girls had blonde hair and blue eyes, skin whiter than snow, and a pure, innocent smile; another had skin as dark as puce, as supple-looking as satin, lithe and glossy, almost sparkling. Little Gao was completely entranced.

The weapons, the treasures, the beautiful women, all were things that normal people would never be able to see.

Could it be that this place did not lay within the mortal realm?

If it really was hell, who knows how many people in the world would be willing to go to hell?

Part 2

—Who are you? What is this place?

The girls only laughed, they didn't speak.

Little Gao wanted to get up, but his shoulders a girl who appeared to be as delicate as a pendant on a fan held him down by the shoulders.

He didn't dare touch her.

He knew that he wasn't the type of person who could easily resist temptation.

Wat drove him crazier was the blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl, who grasped his face with both hands and blew gently into his ear.

Little Gao could feel himself changing, and he was changing in a very awkward and embarrassing way. (2)

Suddenly his body twisted, warping in an unimaginable way and bending in a completely unexpected direction. (3)

The girl holding his shoulders and the girl grasping his face felt something slide past their hands, and suddenly realized the person they had been holding was no longer there. Upon turning their heads, they found him hiding there behind the golden Buddha statue.

“You’d better not come over here,” he said loudly. “I’m not a good person, if you dare make a move in my direction, I won’t be polite.”

He was actually somewhat afraid of these girls, but if they really approached him, he wouldn’t be too sorry, and he wouldn’t be too scared.

Unfortunately, they didn’t go over, because the master of this place had already appeared.

Dashing and thin, of very tall stature, he had a glossy black silk gown casually draped over his body. His long, pitch-black hair hung down loosely over his shoulders.

Though dressed casually, he had the bearing of an emperor.

Especially his face.

His profile was distinct and well-defined.

His face, pale white, completely devoid of color, looked as if it had been carved from white marble; it carried an indescribable, cold grandeur.

As soon as they saw him, the girls dropped gracefully to the ground and prostrated themselves. Little Gao suddenly said, “You’re definitely the master of this place.”

“Yes, I am.”

"I don't know you, and you don't know me. How come you brought me here?"

"I don't know either."

"You don't know either?" cried Little Gao. "How could you not know?"

"Because I didn't make you come with me, you came along with me on your own."

Little Gao was shocked. So shocked that he couldn't even open his mouth for while.

"I came along with you? Don't tell me you're the person with the box?"

"Yes, I am."

Little Gao held his head with his hands. It seemed like he was about to pass out.

An ordinary person wearing coarse clothes, miraculously turning into someone like an emperor.

This kind of thing only happened in myths, and yet Little Gao had just seen it happen.

**

"Exactly what kind of person are you?" Little Gao stepped out from behind the Buddha statue. "Are you a top-notch assassin who wanders from one corner of the earth to the other with your box? Or are you some kind of incredibly rich recluse who's abandoned the world of mortals? These two types of people are complete opposites. Which one are you?"

"What about you?" the man retorted. "What kind of person are you? A hot-blooded kid who's curious about everything in the world? Or a cold-blooded swordsman who views human life as trash?"

"I'm a student of the sword. If someone studies the sword, they should devote their life to it, and not fear death. What about you? Why do you kill people? For money? Or because killing people makes you happy?" Little Gao

stared at him. "Does it make you happy to know you can decide whether people live or die?"

The black robed man turned and walked to the large table. He poured himself some wine from one of the crystal drinking vessels, then slowly drank it down.

Afterwards, he continued in an indifferent voice: "As far as I'm concerned, it's not a happy thing. But sadly, I am like most people in the world; I sometimes have to do things that I don't really want to do."

"Why did you kill Yang Jian?"

"For Zhu Meng. Because I owe him a life."

"Whose life?"

"Mine."

"Zhu Meng saved your life?"

"Most people find it hard to avoid dangerous and challenging circumstances. I'm no different. You'll also face circumstances like that one day, and you can never predict who will be there to save you, just as you can never know what kind of people will die by your hand."

"Not die by my hand, but by my sword," said Little Gao. "The people who've died by my sword are all people who've devoted themselves to the sword. I'm like them, so if I died by their sword, then I would die without complaint."

The black-clothed man suddenly took a long, strangely shaped sword down from the shelf. He looked coolly at Little Gao. "And what if I used this sword to kill you right now?"

"I think it would a great pity," said Little Gao. "Because I still don't know who you are."

"You already know enough, enough for me to kill you."

"Oh?"

“You already know that I killed Yang Jian, and you already sneaked a look at my solitary box.”

“But I didn’t see anything,” said Little Gao. “I still want to know how that could be the most fearsome weapon under heaven.”

“You really want to know?”

“I do. I really do!”

The man suddenly drew the sword, and its cold aura blasted against their faces. Its flickering light was dark green in color.

“This sword is called Green Willow, a relic left behind by Taoist Gu from Mount Ba.⁽⁴⁾” He gently caressed the blade. “Years ago, Taosit Gu swept China with his Cyclone Dancing Willows 49 sword forms. It’s hard to say how many famous swordsmen died under this sword.”

He put down the long sword, and from the rack picked up a flower-shaped broadaxe.

“This is the axe that Hidden Hero Wu Lingqiao from Mount Huangshan used long ago. ⁽⁵⁾ It weighs eighty pounds. Even though he only used 11 different stances, each stance was extremely lethal. It’s said that at the time, no one in Jianghu could hold up against seven of them.”

Next to the broadaxe hung a weapon that looked like somewhat like a spear, and yet wasn’t. Instead of a spear head, it had a sickle-shaped blade, attached to shaft with a metal chain.

“The Iron Chain Flying Sickle can mow people down like grass,” said the black-clothed man. “It’s said that this weapon comes from Japan. Its weapon forms are secretive, never before seen in China.”

He pointed at some of the other weapons on the rack; a pair of Judge’s Brushes, a set of Emei spikes, a Tiger Cross blade, a hooked Wu sword, a polearm, a Persian cutlass and large white bamboo pole. “In the past, these weapons were used by the greatest masters of the time. Each one has its own unique weapons forms, and it is impossible to say how many souls of martial arts masters are collected in them.” ⁽⁶⁾

“But I’m asking about your solitary box,” blurted Little Gao, “not these weapons.”

“My solitary box,” said the black-clothed man, “is the essence of these weapons.”

“I don’t understand. How could a solitary box contain the essence of thirteen different weapons? I looked inside, and all I saw was a bunch of random pieces of metal tubes and parts.”

“There’s a mystery to it, of course you wouldn’t be able to see. But you surely understand that all weapons in the world are made up of random pieces of metal. If you put the pieces of metal together, then they become a weapon.” He finally gave a more detailed explanation: “To have a sword, you need the body, the blade, the hilt, the cross-guard, the grip. If you put these five different things together, then you can make a sword.”

Little Gao finally seemed to understand, at least a little. “Are you saying that you can use the metal parts in the solitary box to make a kind of weapon?”

“Not a kind of weapon, thirteen kinds of weapons. Thirteen completely different types of weapons.”

Little Gao was shocked into silence.

“Thirteen different methods can be used to make thirteen weapons of completely different shape and style. And yet each of these weapons is different from commonly seen weapons, because each one contains the abilities of at least two or three other weapons. The essence of all the weapons forms of all these weapons, are contained in my solitary box.” He looked at Little Gao. “Now do you understand?”

Little Gao was now completely speechless.

He finally understood how exactly Yang Jian, Cloudy Sky and the seven others appeared to have been simultaneously killed by three different types of weapons and yet were killed by a single person.

Of course he’d realized this before, but he hadn’t been able to completely believe it.

Without being able to see with your own eyes, who could believe that such an ingenious, complicated weapon existed in the world? (7)

But Little Gao had no choice but to believe.

So he let out a long sigh. "Whoever forged this weapon definitely is a genius."

"Yes."

The black-clothed man's white, noble-looking, cold face was suddenly filled with a strange expression. It was an expression you might see on the face of a pious believer upon sudden mention of their venerated deity.

"No one can compare to him," said the black-clothed man. "His swordsmanship, his wisdom, his way of thinking, his patience, his blacksmithing skill. No one compares to him."

"Who is he?"

"The same person who forged 'Tearstains.'"

Little Gao was yet again shocked.

He suddenly had a very odd feeling that there must be some strange and mysterious relationship between him and the black-clothed man.

The feeling left him surprised, happy, and frightened.

But he still wanted to know more, about the solitary box, the sword, this amazing person, and what they had to do with each other. But the black-clothed man didn't seem willing to allow him to know much more. He had already changed the subject: "Even though there has never been a weapon as remarkable as this solitary box, using it is not very easy. Without a remarkable person to use it, it can't release the slightest bit of power."

He was not showing off, and had no air of arrogance in his voice. He was simply describing the facts. "Not only must this person be proficient in the forms of all thirteen weapons, and must completely understand their composition, he also must have extremely dexterous hands to be able to assemble the pieces within the box, in only a moment's time." He continued,

“In addition to all of this, he must have an abundance of experience, extreme agility and reflexes, and exceedingly good judgment.”

“Why?”

“Because all opponents are different, and the required weapon and weapon forms are also different. In an extremely short period of time, you must make a judgment about which weapon can effectively overcome your opponent. Before your opponent makes a move, you must decide which parts to put together to form which weapon. You must also completely assemble the weapon. If you are slow in even one step, you’ll die by your opponent’s hand.”

Little Gao laughed bitterly. “It really isn’t an easy thing. A person like this... you could search heaven and earth and I’m afraid you’d only find a few.”

The black-clothed man looked at him quietly. A long time passed, then he said, “To open the solitary box also isn’t easy. And yet you opened it very quickly. Your hands are already dexterous enough.”

“It seems they are.”

“Your martial arts already have a good foundation, and it seems like you practice the mystical Indian yoga arts from the peaks of Mount Everest.” (8)

“Yes, it seems so.”

“The old man who passed ‘Tearstains’ down to you has a connection to my solitary box. So up until now, you’re not dead.”

“Don’t tell me you actually want to kill me? Why haven’t you?”

“Because you need to stay here. I want to pass on to you my martial arts, pass on to you the box, pass on to you everything here.”

**

His words were something that others wouldn’t even have the luck to hear even in their dreams.

—Unparalleled wealth, extremely mystical martial arts, and the most fearsome weapon under heaven.

A young person with nothing in the world who suddenly gets everything, whose luck in life changes in an instant.

What would this young person be feeling in their heart?

Little Gao had no reaction, as if someone had mentioned something that had nothing to do with him.

The black-clothed man continued: “My only requirement is that before you master all of my martial arts, you cannot step foot out of this place.”

The requirement wasn’t too harsh, and actually quite reasonable.

“Unfortunately you forgot to ask me something,” said Little Gao. “You forgot to ask if I’m willing to stay here.”

This question really shouldn’t be asked. Only crazy people and fools would refuse a requirement like this.

Little Gao wasn’t crazy, and he wasn’t a fool. The black-clothed man asked him, “Well, are you willing?”

“No, I’m not.” He continued without an explanation: “And I won’t.”

The black-clothed man’s pupils suddenly pulsed, changing into the point of a needle, the tip of a sword, the stinger of a bee, piercing Little Gao’s eyes.

Little Gao’s didn’t blink. A long time passed, and the black-clothed man asked, “Why aren’t you willing?”

“No real reason, actually,” said Little Gao. “Maybe it’s because I’m too bored here, and I’ve always valued a free and comfortable life.” He stared at the mysterious, fearsome man. “Or maybe it’s because I don’t want to become a person like you.”

“Do you know what kind of person I am?”

"I don't. But I can tell that you are the type of person who lives in the shadows. Whatever face you use when you step outside, it seems you're always stepping out within the shadows." He sighed. "Even though you have immeasurable wealth and the most fearsome weapon under heaven, I get the feeling your life isn't very happy. In fact, I even feel sorry for you."

The cold light emanating from the man's eyes slowly began to disperse, disperse into a murky shadow, and then into nothing.

"Everyone has the right to choose their way of life," continued Little Gao, "including myself. I want to live under the sun. Even if I have to kill people, I'll openly challenge them to a duel, and win a fair victory."

The black-clothed man laughed.

"You think Sima Chaoqun will really give you a fair fight?"

"I challenged him openly and fairly. It's one on one, how could it be unfair?"

"Of course you wouldn't understand now," the man sighed. "I'm afraid by the time you do understand, it will be too late."

"No matter what, I have to go. Right now, I'm about to die from starvation. I just hope you'll let me stay to have a meal, then let me go." He seemed happy again. "I can tell you're not a stingy person, and my requirements aren't very high."

"Definitely not too high," the man said coldly. "But sadly, you forgot to ask me something."

"What's that?"

"No one who has ever visited this place has ever left alive."

Little Gao suddenly laughed. "I believe you. But luckily there's an exception to everything." He laughed happily. "I believe you'll definitely make an exception for me."

"Why will I make an exception for you?"

"Because we're friends, not enemies. And I've never offended you."

"You're mistaken," said the man. "You're not my friend. You don't qualify to be my friend."

His eyes suddenly shone forth with a strange light. "If I make an exception for you, it will only be for one reason."

"What reason?"

"Because you feel sorry for me."

The expression in his eyes suddenly changed into one of bitter and anguished cynicism. "This world only contains people who hate me or fear me. There's never been a single person who felt sorry for me. For this single reason, I think there's no harm in giving you a chance."

"A chance? What chance?"

The black-clothed man stood up, and casually grabbed two crystal bottles from the long table. Then he asked Little Gao to pick one of them.

"Why do you want me to pick?" asked Little Gao. "They both look the same. All the bottles look the same."

"There's one small difference."

"What difference?"

"One bottle has poison in it. Deadly, gut-wrenching poison."

**

Actually the two bottles had another difference about them. One of the bottles had a little less wine than the other.

Because the black-clothed man had already poured some of the wine into a glass and drank it.

He still lived.

Little Gao saw this, but he still chose the other bottle.

The black-clothed man looked at him coldly and asked, "You've decided?"

"I've decided. And I won't change my mind."

"Didn't you see me drink the glass of wine just now?"

"I saw."

"And don't you know which bottle I drank from?"

"I know."

"Then why wouldn't you pick that bottle?"

"Because I don't want to die." Little Gao laughed, even more cheerfully. "You know I'm not blind, and not stupid. I can obviously see which bottle you drank from. But you want me to make a decision, because most people in this situation would choose to drink from the first bottle."

That was a fact.

"Luckily I'm not most people, and you wouldn't lump me in with most people. If that bottle really had no poison in it, you wouldn't use that method to test me. If you wanted to overcome me, you would definitely use a more challenging method."

It was definitely not an easy decision.

Even many very intelligent people might come to the conclusion that the poison was in the bottle the black-clothed man drank from, but might not have the guts to drink from the other.

"The poison is yours, of course you have the antidote. Even if you drank eight or ten bottles it wouldn't be a problem. Of course, I can't drink a drop, so I have to pick the other bottle."

The black-clothed man looked at Little Gao with a very strange expression. "And if you choose incorrectly?"

"Then I guess I'll die, and that's that."

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he took the bottle and drank a mouthful.

And then he collapsed.

**

(1) I'm substituting lychee for long'an. Both fruits are similar in size and shape, but I'm pretty sure long'an is not as commonly known among western audiences.

(2) I'm not sure if it comes across in my translation, but the "change" in his body he's referring to is Uh yeah, you can guess....

(3) Okay, my translation differs from the original Chinese, because I think the original can't be translated well into English directly. The original says, "his body suddenly twisted, from a position that no person could imagine, twisting in a direction that no person could imagine."

(4) Mount Ba is a mountain in Sichuan. <http://goo.gl/uby2jU>

(5) Mount Huangshan is one of the most famous mountains in China. <http://goo.gl/X7fqtz>

(6) Here are links to pictures of some of the weapons. I did my best to translate everything correctly, and tried to find 'official' or existing translations of as many of the weapons as possible. If I made any mistakes, please let me know. I'm especially not sure of my translation of Tiger cross blade, which I've seen before in movies and stuff but am not sure how to translate into English.

Flower-shaped broadaxe <http://goo.gl/DZmRK5>

Judges' brushes <http://goo.gl/xGL43z>

Emei spikes <http://goo.gl/BbHJmA>

Tiger cross blade <http://goo.gl/HzRKs4>

Polearm <http://goo.gl/EvHDX>

(7) He actually uses like four or five adjectives in Chinese that all basically mean the same thing. Precise, delicate, complicated, etc.

(8) The word he uses to describe Mount Everest is actually "Holy Mother of the Water," which apparently is what they call Mount Everest in Tibetan.

CHAPTER 5 – EXTRAORDINARY MEETINGS, EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES

Part 1

The twenty-fifth day of the first month of the lunar calendar.

Chang'an.

Gao Jianfei wasn't dead.

His judgment had been correct, and he'd had enough guts, so he hadn't died.

The only thing he was sorry about was that he had no idea how he ended up leaving that place, and no idea where the mysterious cave was located.

**

After drinking the alcohol from the bottle, he had immediately fainted and passed into a coma. Later, he found himself back in the cheap inn, sleeping on the plank bed in his small room.

How had he returned? When had he returned? He didn't know.

No one else knew, either.

No one knew where he had been for the past two days, and no one cared.

Luckily, this was evidence that his experiences in the last two days were not a dream.

—A solitary box. A solitary, dark brown, oxblood box.

**

When Little Gao awoke, he found the box.

It had been placed on the little table next to his bed. The color and shape was exactly like the box he had opened before. Even the spring lock was the same.

If this box was really as unique as the other box, how could the man possibly leave it here for him?

Little Gao didn't believe it was, but he couldn't help but be intrigued, and couldn't help but open it to take a look.

Thankfully, he hadn't forgotten the lesson he learned last time.

It wasn't very fun to get knocked out every time you opened a box.

So by the time the box opened, Little Gao was already standing outside the window. Cold wind blew in through the window like a knife. Whatever type of knockout powder there was, it would definitely be swept clean away by the wind.

This time, Little Gao slowly entered through the window and circled around the room.

As soon as he saw what was in the box, he was a little bit disappointed.

The only things inside were some pearls, jewelry and jade, along with a pile of gold leaf.

It was enough to buy the whole street, enough to be able to hire a whole city of people to devote their lives to him.

**

Three days had passed.

During the three days, he'd gone out carrying the solitary box, but his life hadn't changed at all.

He still lived at the cheapest inn, and ate the cheapest boiled cabbage noodle soup.

It seemed as if he didn't know what he could do with the contents of the box, and didn't know that he had already become filthy rich.

Because he hadn't thought about it and didn't want to know.

He really had no concept of the value of money. And he wasn't willing to let his lifestyle be changed by anything.

But on the twenty-fifth day of the first month of the lunar calendar, his life changed. It changed in a very strange way.

Part 2

It was a bright day. After eating noodles at the noodle shop, he began preparing to go back and sleep.

There had been no word from Sima Chaoqun and Zhuo Donglai, and he didn't know when exactly he should prepare to duel.

But he felt no nervousness.

After giving him the enormous gift, the mysterious black-clothed man had not sent any messages either.

He was prepared to give the box back to him at any moment, so he carried it with him at all times. But he was afraid he might never see the man again, and so the box had turned into a burden for him.

But Little Gao wasn't too worried about it.

There didn't seem to be anything in the world that could affect his mood.

If someone wanted him to wait for two days, he would wait for two days. If they wanted him to wait for two months, he would wait for two months. In any case, he knew that eventually in life he would reach a time when he had to wait for news about something, so what was the point in getting anxious?

He had already made a firm resolution; before this decisive battle, he wouldn't do anything.

He must definitely keep his body in top physical condition, and maintain a good, balanced mood.

**

This afternoon, as he walked back along the long, snow-packed street, he realized that someone was watching him. Little Gao didn't need to turn back and look; he had already guessed who the person was.

Last night when he was eating, he had noticed someone staring at him, the way a cat stares at a mouse.

The person wore raggedy clothes and a floppy hat; his body was not very tall, and he had a big beard; his footsteps when he walked were very light. It seemed he practiced kung fu.

Little Gao had never seen this person before, and had no idea why he might be watching him.

He never thought of himself as the type of person who would attract the interest of others.

After walking for a bit he couldn't hear the footsteps behind him, so he let out a relieved sigh. And then suddenly, from the alley right next to him, flew forth a rope.

It was a coarse rope, tied by slipknot into a noose. In an instant, it had encircled Little Gao's neck, wrapping around it in a strangely accurate fashion.

When a person's neck is encircled by a noose, one's eyes will bulge out, one's tongue will protrude, and one's breathing can be cut off at any moment.

Little Gao understood all of this. So when the rope pulled, he flew along with it, like a kite.

The person in the alley pulling the rope was the man with the beard.

He pulled hard, but unfortunately the rope had already snapped, and the part wrapped around the neck of his target already thrown back toward him.

Big Beard turned around and ran. He ran for a while, and then had a strange feeling.

Because, as it turned out, Little Gao was not chasing him.

He ran two more paces, and then stopped, looking back to see if he was being pursued.

He turned around and looked at Little Gao, shocked. "Why aren't you chasing me?"

The question was very clear, and Little Gao's response even clearer. "Why should I chase you?" he retorted.

Big Beard started. "Don't you know that I just tried to use that rope to strangle you to death?"

"I know."

"If you know, then why would you let me go?"

"Because you didn't actually strangle me to death."

"But you must at least want to ask who I am, and why I want to strangle you to death."

"No, I don't want to ask."

"Why not?"

"Because I really don't want to know." When he finished speaking, he turned around and started walking away, not even looking back.

Big Beard was speechless.

He had never met a single person in his life like Little Gao.

And Little Gao had also never met a person like him before. Even though Little Gao didn't chase him, he chased Little Gao, and once again pulled out the rope. He quickly tied a noose and threw it around Little Gao's neck.

He threw accurately, and Little Gao was once again caught.

Unfortunately, even though he was caught, it didn't do any good.

No matter how hard the man pulled, Little Gao just stood there. Not only was his neck unharmed, but he didn't move an inch.

"What kind of a person are you," asked Big Beard. "How come I can't strangle you?"

"Because in addition to my neck, I also have fingers."

When the noose slipped around his neck, he had simply used a finger to block it, right in front of his larynx.

He flexed his finger, and Big Beard was suddenly pulled toward him. He turned around, and Big Beard's head bumped into his chest.

"Your rope game isn't very good," said Little Gao. "Can you play any other games?"

"I can play blade games," said Big Beard.

He still wasn't standing firmly, but a dagger appeared in his hand, stabbing toward Little Gao's soft midsection.

Sadly, his blade wasn't fast enough. Little Gao used a finger to tap his wrist, and the dagger went flying away.

"It looks like you're letting me go again." Little Gao sighed and shook his head. "Whatever game you play, they're all useless against me."

Big Beard had already fallen onto the ground. He suddenly used a move called "Straightening Carp." His body flipped up, and his two legs wrapped around Little Gao's head like a mahua dough twist. (1)

Even Little Gao never thought this would happen.

Big Beards legs were extremely nimble and flexible, and also very strong. Little Gao almost couldn't breathe. The odor from the pants that covered the legs was quite ripe.

Little Gao couldn't take it any longer. Using a very strange method, his body twisted, rolled, turned, and heaved; Big Beard was thrown off and slammed onto the ground. His pants split open, revealing his two legs.

His pants had been about to split from the very beginning, and when they split they were nearly completely destroyed, and revealed almost all of the two legs.

And now, Little Gao was shocked into speechlessness. It was as if he had just seen a beautiful fresh flower blossom out from a pile of muck.

**

Everyone has legs, but Little Gao had never before seen a pair of legs that looked as good as these.

Not only had Little Gao never seen anything like them before, most people in the world had never seen anything like them.

Only a few people in the world had ever laid eyes on these legs.

They were slender, long and fit, their contour even, soft and graceful, the muscles flexible, the color of the skin milky white, like that of fresh milk.

Little Gao would never have dreamed that a dirty, stinky person like Big Beard would have legs like these.

What was even more unimaginable was that this bearded man who had just tried to use a rope to strangle him to death, and then tried to use a blade to kill him, would suddenly start crying. He covered his face with his hands and cried like a child, sounding grieved and heartbroken.

Little Gao had planned to leave without even turning his head, as he had moments before, but couldn't hold back from asking, "Why are you crying?"

"I like crying, I'm happy to cry, I want to cry. It's none of your business!"

A grown man with such a big beard, speaking words that sounded like as unreasonable as a child, so much so that his voice seemed to have changed to that of a child's... What kind of freak was this, and how could Little Gao possible continue to worry about him?

Little Gao decided to ignore him and leave, but Big Beard suddenly shouted, "Stop!"

"Why should I stop?"

"You're going to leave just like that? It's that easy for you?"

"Why can't I go? Don't you still want to strangle me to death, or stab me to death? Leaving like this, I'm actually treating you very well. What else do you want?"

"I want you to dig your eyeballs out," Big Beard said. "Take your two eyeballs and dig them out of your eye sockets!"

Little Gao laughed again. "I'm not insane, why would I dig my eyeballs out?"

"Because you saw my legs," said Big Beard. "These legs are not for just anyone to see."

Little Gao had to admit that the legs were very special, and especially good-looking.

But he hadn't looked on purpose, and looking at someone's legs didn't count as something incredible.

"If you're not happy," he said, "You can look at my legs. Look at them as long as you want."

"Dog farts!"

"I'm not a dog, and I didn't fart."

"Of course you're not a dog, because you're stupider than a dog. All the dogs under heaven are smarter than you, whether they are big dogs or small dogs or male dogs or female dogs, they are all one hundred times smarter than you. Because you're a pig." Big Beard was getting more and more

angry. Suddenly he jumped up. "You pig, don't tell me you still can't tell I'm a woman?"

"How could you be a woman? I don't believe it," he said numbly. "How could a woman have a beard?"

Big Beard appeared to be on the verge of going crazy with anger. Suddenly, she ripped the beard off and threw it at Little Gao's face.

Her body flew forward as well, waist twisting, her two legs once again entangling Little Gao.

Two smooth legs, completely lacking any hair.

This time Little Gao really couldn't move, he could only look at her and force a smile. "I have no hatred or enmity with you, why do you have to treat me like this?"

"Because I've taken a fancy to you."

Little Gao was petrified. Luckily the beardless Big Beard quickly went on: "Don't feel full of yourself. What I've taken a fancy to isn't you yourself."

"What did you take a fancy with?"

"That box of yours," said the beardless young woman. "If you just give me this box, I won't come bother you again. You'll never even see me again."

"Do you know what's inside this box?"

"Of course I know," said the young woman. "Your box has gold and jewels worth at least eighty to one-hundred thousand pieces of silver."

"How do you know?"

Little Gao was obviously astonished, because he had never opened the box in front of anyone.

Not only did she not answer the question, she asked one: "Do you know who my father is?"

“No.”

“He’s a god among thieves. A thief god with miraculous hands. He’s stolen things from everywhere under heaven, and has never been caught.”

“Great! Great skill!”

“But, he falls short of my grandfather. Do you know who my grandfather is?” she asked Little Gao.

“No.”

“He’s a great robber. If he sees people, he robs them. If he sees ghosts, he robs them.”

Little Gao let out a sigh. “So it turns out your family has three generations in the same profession.”

“You’re finally smartening up,” Lady Big Beard said. “How could a third generation member of this profession not know what things are inside your box?”

“I’ve heard before that masters of this profession have that ability. From the way someone walks, they can figure out the value of what that person is carrying.”

“Absolutely correct,” said the young woman. “But, I can’t tell what type of person you are.”

“Oh!”

“Your box has gold and jewels in it, but the only thing you eat every day is a bowl of boiled cabbage noodle soup that costs three or four coins. Are you some kind of miser? Or just some freak?”

“The box I have might be full of gold and jewels, but unfortunately they aren’t mine. Even if I wanted to give them to you, I couldn’t. And I can guarantee you, even if your skill was ten times greater than it is, you should forget about trying to steal it.”

The young woman suddenly sighed.

"I know I can't steal it from you. But regardless, I had to give it a shot, even at the risk of my life. I'll keep trying even if I die!"

"Why?"

"Because if I don't come up with fifty thousand pieces of silver in the next three days, I'm dead for sure." Her eyes rolled as tears streamed out. "I'm thinking that, other than you, where else can I get fifty thousand pieces of silver?" Her tears fell like raindrops. "I can see that you're a good person. Please, help me. I'll be grateful to you for my entire life."

Little Gao was already starting to soften. "Why do you have to come up with fifty thousand pieces of silver in three days?"

"Because Sima Chaoqun's Great Protection Agency will definitely require fifty thousand to escort me home safely. My home is in Northeast China, without them to take me there, I'll be dead on the roadside at any time, with no one to take care of my corpse."

Little Gao laughed coldly. "Charging fifty thousand to escort someone to Northeast China. I think that's just too dark-hearted."

"I don't blame them," said the young woman. "Escorting me won't be easy. If I was Sima Chaoqun, my starting fee might even be higher."

"Why?"

"Because the people who want to kill me are too fiendish and terrifying. Nobody is willing to go up against them. You would never believe that there is anyone under heaven as brutal and ruthless as them." Her body began to quiver, and even though ash covered her face, you could still see that it twisted with panic-stricken terror.

It seemed she truly feared for her life.

"Who are they?" blurted out Little Gao.

It seemed like the young woman didn't hear his question. Tears pouring down, she said, "I know they won't let me go. I know that they can kill me any time they want."

It seemed as if she had some evil and inauspicious premonition, like a wild animal who knew a snare lay ahead, with hunters coming from behind to complete the kill.

Although premonitions of this sort of usually unexplainable, they are often correct.

At that moment, from the tops of the short walls on either side of the narrow alley, hidden weapons shot forth. From the left, a rain-like cluster of silver needles, from the right, several shining flashes.

**

Gao Jianfei's reaction was extremely fast.

He used the box in his right hand, as well as his cloth-wrapped bundle, to block the rain of needles coming from the left side.

He was already carrying the young woman, who was still had her legs wrapped around him, so he tilted to the left and flew up.

But at the same time, he heard her emit a sighing moan, and he felt her two legs slacken. She fell to the ground.

Little Gao wasn't pulled down with her. On the contrary, he shot up, tapping his left foot with his right, borrowing strength to create strength. He flew up nearly nine feet into the air. Behind the walls on either side of the narrow alley he could see a person fleeing. They were extremely agile, their lightness kung fu not weak.

By the time they had fled several meters away to stand on the eaves of the buildings, Little Gao had alighted onto the top of the wall. Suddenly, the two figures spun around and stared at him. Hideous masks covered their faces, and their eyes brimmed with fierce, ruthless maliciousness. One of them spoke to him in a cold, raspy voice: "Friend, your kung fu is good. To master a lightness kung fu like 'Climbing the Cloud Ladder' is not an easy thing. It would really be a pity for you to die at such a young age."

"Thankfully, I don't want to die at the moment. And in fact, I can't."

“Then you’d better listen to some friendly advice. You shouldn’t get involved in this matter.”

“Why can’t I get involved?”

“If you provoke us, it’s like getting tangled up with the devil. Whether you’re eating or sleeping, no matter what you’re doing, you could suddenly find a hidden blade pressed against your throat. Or when you wake up, you might find a meat cleaver slowly slicing your neck.” His voice was sinister. “No matter who involves themselves in this matter, they won’t meet a happy end.”

Little Gao let out a sigh.

“This thing doesn’t sound very fun. But sadly, I have an innately strange temper.”

“Oh?”

“When people don’t want me to get involved with things, it just makes me want to get involved more.”

The other man let out a cold laugh. “Then you can go back and await death.”

In unison, the two men flipped up into the air and flew away.

Their technique was fast, but Little Gao could still catch them. However, there was someone lying on the ground. After she had fallen, she hadn’t moved at all. Her long, glistening legs were quickly turning purple from the freezing cold.

Actually, she had nothing to do with Little Gao, but Little Gao couldn’t let her and her two bare legs freeze to death in the snow of the narrow alley.

Her injury was on her back. A very, very tiny wound, it was already swelling up and burning.

—The hidden weapon was poisoned, definitely poisoned.

But luckily, she had met Gao Jianfei, who from a small age had lived on a remote mountain infested with poisoned bugs, ants and snakes. He would definitely have a poison antidote on his body.

So, she didn't die, and in fact, she regained consciousness almost immediately.

Part 3

When she regained consciousness, she found herself laying on Little Gao's wood plank bed in the small inn. The wound was spread with medicine and covered with a strip of coarse cloth.

She looked at Little Gao for a long time, and then softly asked, "You're not dead yet?"

"Not quite yet."

"Then, I'm not dead yet either?"

"Not quite yet."

"How could I not be dead?" She seemed surprised. "They already chased me down, how could I not be dead?"

"Your luck was good, you met me."

The beardless young woman suddenly got angry. "I've been forced to the end of the rope by these people, chased everywhere like a wild dog, hiding everywhere. Then I got poisoned by hidden weapons. How could say that my luck is good?" She stared at Little Gao. "I really want to hear your explanation. How could this possibly count as good luck?"

Little Gao could only smile wily.

The young woman stared at him for a long time, then sighed. "I know you won't give me the box. So you might as well leave me alone."

“Why?”

“You shouldn’t get involved in this matter. My life or death has nothing to do with you. You don’t even know me.”

“I didn’t know you before, but now I do know you a little bit.”

“Dog farts!” she cried. “What do you know about me? Tell me!” (2)

Little Gao didn’t say anything.

He had never met someone like this. Never had and never would again. (3)

“What place is this?” she asked him. “Why would you bring me a doghouse like this?”

“Because this isn’t a doghouse, this is where I live.”

The young woman yet again stared at him, eyes wide.

“You’re a pig, you really are a pig,” she said loudly. “The whole street knows you live here, and you bring me here? Will you only be happy if you watch me die by their hands? Are you just waiting for them to come cut me to pieces so you can be happy?”

Little Gao laughed.

One didn’t often meet a woman as unreasonable as this.

The young woman grew even more angry.

“You’re laughing? What’s there to laugh about?”

“What do you want me to do,” asked Little Gao. “You want me to cry?”

“You pig, how can pigs cry? When did you ever see a pig cry?”

“You’re right.” Little Gao had suddenly realized something. “Pigs really can’t cry. But pigs also can’t laugh.”

The young woman seemed about to go crazy. She sighed. "You're right. You're not a pig, you're a person. A good person. I beg you, just send me back. Send me back immediately. The faster the better."

"Send you back where?"

"Back to where I live. They won't be able to find me there."

"If they can't find it, then how can I find it?"

"It never occurred to you that there's someone here who definitely knows how to get there?"

"Who's that?"

"It's me!" she shouted.

Part 4

It was an average-sized courtyard residence, and it housed sixteen families.
(4)

These sixteen families were clearly down and out. Only people with no means would live in a place like this.

If you can't imagine how a family of eight could live in a small room the size of a pigeon cage, then you should come to this compound, and see how some people in this world are forced to live.

**

Lately, the sixteen doors within the compound had become seventeen doors. The landlord had split the wooden firewood shack in the back of the courtyard into two sections and rented one of them to an outsider. A person who wore a floppy hat and had a long beard.

After seeing the place where this beardless young woman lived, Little Gao laughed again.

“It looks like your Excellency’s palace is smaller than my doghouse.”

He had returned her back.

Were it day, the compound would be filled with chickens flying, dogs leaping, pigs squealing, people talking loudly, husbands and wives arguing, in-laws squabbling, old men spitting, kids peeing; even a housefly entering the compound would be noticed.

Luckily, it was now dark, and they slipped in over the back wall.

If a person wanted to hide, it would be difficult to find a better place than this.

How could this young woman find such a place? Little Gao had no choice but to admire her.

What he couldn’t figure out was that just now, she had seemed completely clear and conscious. All the poison seemed to have been expelled from her body, and yet she had suddenly slipped back into a coma. And this time she was unconscious for even longer than the first time. Little Gao always thought his poison antidote was extremely effective, but now he was a little doubtful.

Was the poison that afflicted her too powerful, and had already entered her marrow and arteries? Or was his antidote not strong enough?

Whatever the reason, Little Gao had no options left.

Her condition was unstable. Sometimes she would slip into unconsciousness, sometimes she would wake up. When unconscious, she would be soaked with cold sweat and rave deliriously. When awake, she would gaze at Little Gao with listless, expressionless eyes, as if she was afraid he would abandon her.

Little Gao could only stay by her side. Even his custom of eating boiled cabbage noodle soup was cast aside. When he was hungry, he would buy a few mantou or some bread from outside the back of the courtyard to allay his hunger. When tired, he would sleep in a chair for a while.

He didn't know why he was doing this, why he would completely change his life habits for a woman, and a stranger at that.

She was beyond doubt beautiful.

The first time Little Gao had used a damp cloth to clear her dusty, sweaty face, he had discovered that not only were her legs beautiful, her face was also extremely pretty.

But if anyone had told him that the reason he stayed was because he was falling in love with her, Little Gao would deny it to his death.

He had never thought about women before. He'd always considered them to be like one grain in a big wok of cooked rice.

Then why was he doing this?

Was it because of her miserable situation? Was it because of her two imploring eyes, silent, but filled with gratitude?

Or could it be that the relationship between two people can just never be explained by others?

**

It seemed that two or three days had passed. Little Gao was dirty and tired, but he felt no regret.

If the same thing happened again, he would make all the same choices.

These few days, she hadn't spoken a single word, but looking at the expression in her eyes, you could see that he had already become the closest person to her in the world. He was the only person she could rely on. What kind of feeling was that?

Little Gao knew the feelings in his own heart. Never before in his life had someone depended on him like this.

One day when he woke up, he found her gazing at him numbly. She looked at him for a long time, and then suddenly said, "You're tired. You should lay down and sleep a bit."

Her voice was soft and weak. Little Gao didn't even think about it. He lied down on the half of the bed that she'd left open for him. The two of them seemed to think that this was a very natural thing, just as natural as the flowers blooming when the spring wind blew over the land.

As soon as Little Gao lied down, he was asleep.

Being so tired, he slept deeply. He didn't know how long he slept, but by the time he awoke, dusk was falling.

The person sleeping next to him had already gotten up, washed and dressed. She'd changed clothes, and had tied back her long, flowing hair with a silk ribbon. She sat at the foot of the bed, gazing at him.

As the sky outside grew dark, the whistling, cold wind slowly died down.

Everything grew calm and quiet. Suddenly, she softly asked him, "Do you know my name?"

"No, I don't."

"You don't even know my name. Why would you treat me so well?"

"I don't know."

Did he really not know?

He only knew that he after meeting a woman like this, he had done these things.

He didn't understand anything else.

She sighed quietly. "Actually, I don't know who you are either, and I don't know your name." She gazed at his face. "But I know that you'll make space for me to go lay down."

He made space for her, and she lied down. She lied down next to him, and then into his arms.

Everything that happened was natural, just as natural as things growing when the spring rain moistens the earth.

So natural, so beautiful, enchantingly beautiful.

Part 5

A silent, cold night. A silent, long street.

Walking hand in hand down the snow-covered street, they found a small food stall underneath the eaves of the street where they ate a bowl of lamb bread soup, hot, fragrant, and spicy. (5)

They didn't drink any wine.

They didn't need wine to arouse their feelings.

Afterwards, they walked hand in hand back to the cheap inn. Little Gao still had some things there he wished to collect.

As soon as they rounded the street corner, they saw something very strange.

Her hand, enclasped by his warm palm, grew ice cold.

**

The inn had closed already, but a man stood in the faint lantern light outside the doors.

He stood there like wood, unmoving in the cold, night wind. His face was purple from the cold, but he stood there very calmly.

Little Gao clasped her cold hand, and quietly said, "Don't worry. He's here for me."

"How do you know?"

"He's from the Great Protection Agency. I saw him once on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month."

"If you see someone once, you never forget them?"

"Pretty much."

They still hadn't walked forward, but the man bowed respectfully toward Little Gao and saluted him.

"Your servant Sun Da is here to pay respects to Hero Gao."

"How do you know who I am?"

"On the fifteenth day of the first lunar month, your servant saw Hero Gao," said Sun Da steadily. "I saw you in the room where Yang Jian was killed."

"Don't tell me that once you see someone you never forget them?"

"Correct."

Little Gao laughed. "I remember you too. You're the one person who I didn't knock down that day."

"Hero Gao showed me mercy."

"What are you standing there for? Are you waiting for me?"

"Yes," said Sun Da. "Your servant has already been waiting here two days and one night."

"You've been standing there the whole time waiting?"

"These past two days, Hero Gao's whereabouts were uncertain. Your servant was worried he would miss Hero Gao, and wasn't willing to take a step away."

"What if I didn't return just now?"

"Then your servant would keep waiting."

"What if I didn't return for three days and three nights. Would you wait keep waiting for me for three days and three nights?"

“Even if Hero Gao didn’t return for three months, your servant would still stand here waiting.” Sun Da was very calm as he spoke.

“Who sent you here?” asked Little Gao. “Was it Zhuo Donglai?”

“Yes, it was.”

“Would you really do anything he asked you to do?”

“Mr. Zhuo’s orders are like a mountain. Down to this day, no one has ever dared disobey.”

“Why do you all obey him like this?”

“Your servant doesn’t know. I only know how to obey orders, I’ve never thought about why.”

Gao Jianfei sighed. “He really is amazing. Not only does he have courage, resourcefulness and foresight, he has the ability to be a general. I’ve always wondered, why isn’t he the chief of the Great Protection Agency?”

Sun Da had no reaction. It seemed as if he hadn’t heard at all. From within his garment he produced a large red invitation envelope. He handed it forward respectfully with two hands.

“This is what Mr. Zhuo asked your servant to deliver to Hero Gao.”

“You waited here for two days and one night just to deliver an invitation to me?”

“Yes.”

“Did you ever consider that leaving it at the front desk would be the same as delivering it yourself?”

“Your servant never considered this. There are a lot of things your servant has never considered. Thinking about things too much isn’t always a good thing.”

Little Gao laughed again.

“True. That’s true.” He took the envelope. “I should learn from you.”

**

Gao Jianfei didn’t need to open the envelope to know that it wasn’t an invitation to pay a friendly visit, but rather a letter of challenge.

A simple and clear challenge.

“The first day of the second lunar month. Before dawn.
Li Village, The Temple of Maternal Grace, Great Wild Goose Pagoda.
Sima Chaoqun.” (6)

**

“The first day of the second lunar month. What day is today?” asked Little Gao of Sun Da.

“Today is the thirtieth day of the first lunar month.”

“The day he picked is tomorrow?”

“Correct.”

Sun Da gave another respectful salute. “Your servant takes his leave.”

He turned around and walked away. He had walked a short distance when Little Gao suddenly called for him to stop.

“You’re called Sun Da?” he asked the staid young man. “Are you Sun Tong’s brother?”

“I am.” Sun Da stopped for a moment, but he didn’t turn his head. “Your servant is Sun Tong’s brother.”

**

Cold night. As cold as the edge of a knife.

As he watched Sun Da's reflection on the snow slowly disappear into the distance, Little Gao suddenly asked a question of the woman who had been standing at his side this whole time. "Did you notice something?"

"Notice what?"

"You're a very good-looking woman. From birth, men want to see a woman like you. But from beginning to end, Sun Da didn't look at you even once."

"Why would I want him to look at me? Why would you want him to look?" It seemed she was a little upset. "Don't tell me you need other men to stare at me for you to be happy? Is that what you mean?"

Little Gao hadn't made her upset. When a woman is being held by her lover, she can't really be mad at anything.

"Actually, I knew all along what you meant," she said softly. "I just wanted to tell you, Sun Da is a complicated person." Her voice became even softer. "But I didn't want you to tell me that other thing. I don't want to know about that kind of thing."

"What things do you want to know about?"

"I want to know why Sima Chaoqun invited you to meet him tomorrow at the Wild Goose Pagoda."

"Actually, he didn't invite me," said Little Gao, "it was I who invited him. On the fifteenth of the first lunar month, I invited him."

"Why?"

"Because I thought of something. I've always wanted to know, is the forever invincible Sima Chaoqun really invincible?"

Before he finished speaking, he found that her hand had suddenly once again grown ice cold.

He thought she was going to plead with him, plead for him not to go tomorrow, so that she wouldn't be scared and worried.

He never would have thought that she would actually tell him, "You must go tomorrow. And you must defeat him. But you must promise me one thing."

"What thing?"

"Don't touch me tonight. Starting right now, don't touch me." She had already pushed Little Gao away. "I want you to go back with me now and get a good rest."

Part 6

Little Gao couldn't sleep. It wasn't because of the two long, beautiful legs next to him. And it wasn't because he was nervous or anxious about tomorrow's early morning battle.

He'd fallen asleep at first.

He was confident in himself, and confident in the woman next to him.

"I know you'll wait for me to return," he told her. "Maybe by the time you wake up, I'll already be back."

"Why do I have to wait for you to come back? Why can't I come with you?"

"Because you're a woman, and women usually get nervous easily. When I'm going up against Sima Chaoqun, life and death, victory and defeat, could all be decided in an instant. If you're watching, you'll get nervous. If you're nervous, I'll get nervous. And if I'm nervous, I'll be dead."

"Can you find someone to go with you who won't make you nervous, but that can watch out for you?"

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I couldn't find one."

“Don’t tell me you have no friends?”

“I used to have no friends at all, now I have one. But unfortunately he’s in Luoyang.”

“Luoyang?”

“If you ever end up in Luoyang, you’ll definitely hear of him. His surname is Zhu. He’s called Zhu Meng.”

She said nothing, not even a single word. And Little Gao didn’t notice how the expression on her face had changed.

He had started to practice his strange and unusual movements again.

These drills could not only make his muscles flexible, and fill him with vigor, they could also clear his thinking and stabilize his mood.

Therefore, he went to sleep quickly, and deeply. Usually he would be able to sleep until daylight.

But this night he woke up half way through the night, awakened by a strange feeling.

It was a time when heaven and earth were peaceful. It was so quiet than only the sound of snowflakes gently falling onto the eaves could be heard.

That noise wouldn’t wake anyone.

At first, Little Gao felt very strange, and didn’t understand why he had suddenly woken up.

But then he understood.

—There was only one person left in the room. The person sleeping next to him was gone.

**

When a person is on the top of an immeasurably tall building, and then falls off, what feeling do they have?

That was the exact feeling in Little Gao's heart right now.

He suddenly felt a wave of dizziness in his head, and his body collapsed. He bent over uncontrollably and vomited.

Because in that instant, he knew that she would never again return to his side again.

**

Why did she leave?

Why did she go so quietly, without a sentence, without a word left behind?

Little Gao didn't understand, because he couldn't think.

In his silent, freezing night, at this most frigid of hours, he could only think of one thing.

—He didn't even know her name.

**

(1) Mahua is a classic type of Chinese snack, made from twisted fried dough.<http://goo.gl/DNiWA6>

(2) Two quick notes. I'm changing the translation a bit. In their banter moments, they actually keep using the word for "relationship." As in, "you have no relationship with me." It doesn't mean romantic relationship, it just means some sort of connection. I changed it to "knowing" because I think it sounds better in English and also carries the same meaning.

(3) I'm removing a line that I think is totally superfluous in English. The original says, "he had never met someone like this, he never had before, and never would again. But now, he unexpectedly had met a person like this." In Chinese I think it sounds fine, but in English it's just awkward to have this level of repetition.

(4) By courtyard residence, I mean the classic Chinese siheyuan style building.<http://goo.gl/xIHjtR>

(5) This is 羊肉泡馍 yang rou pao mo, a Shaanxi specialty

(6) This temple and pagoda are both famous landmarks in modern-day Xi'an.<http://goo.gl/WV66S> <http://goo.gl/FCWYv6>

CHAPTER 8 – SEVEN STORY BUDDHIST PAGODA

Part 1

The 1st day of the second month of the lunar calendar.

Li Village, the Temple of Maternal Grace.

Early morning.

It had started snowing in the middle of the night, and hadn't stopped. The courtyard of the temple had just been swept clean, but it had already been covered with a layer of silvery white.

The morning bell had already been sounded. The cold wind carried with it the indistinct sound of Buddhist chants as it flowed into a meditation room on the right hand side of the courtyard.

Sima Chaoqun sat silently on a prayer mat, listening, quietly drinking from a cold bottle of alcohol that he'd brought last night.

It was as cold as ice, but as he drank the baijiu, it felt like a scorching fire.

Zhuo Donglai had entered the room, and was staring at him coldly.

Sima Chaoqun pretended not to notice.

Zhuo Donglai finally spoke. "Isn't a too early to be drinking?" he asked coldly. "If you want to drink today, shouldn't you wait until a little bit later?"

"Why?"

"Because you're about to face a very formidable opponent. It's very possible that he's more powerful than either of us imagine."

"Oh?"

“So if you want to drink, you should at least wait until after the duel.”

Sima Chaoqun suddenly laughed.

“Why should I wait until then? Have you forgotten that I am the forever invincible Sima Chaoqun?” An indescribable derision filled his laughter. “In any case, I won’t lose. Even if I drink a whole jug, I still won’t lose. Because you’ve definitely arranged everything ahead of time, arranged every detail.” Sima Chaoqun laughed loudly. “That kid Gao Jianfei can’t get away with losing, and can’t get away without dying.”

Zhuo Donglai didn’t laugh, but he didn’t admit to what Sima Chaoqun said. Neither did he deny it. His face was completely expressionless.

Sima Chaoqun looked at him. “This time can you tell me what you arranged?”

Zhuo Donglai was silent for a long time. “Some things just happen,” he said indifferently. “There’s no need to arrange anything.”

“So you let Gao Jianfei, by chance, encounter some things like that.”

“Every person will eventually encounter things like that. Whatever people encounter them, they will all be equally helpless.”

He suddenly walked over and grabbed the bottle of baijiu from the short table next to the prayer mat, and poured a bit into a glass of clear water.

The alcohol and the water mixed together instantly.

“This is a very natural thing, isn’t it?” asked Zhuo Donglai of Sima Chaoqun.

“Yes.”

“Some people are just like this,” said Zhuo Donglai. “When they meet, they will mix together like alcohol and water.”

“But after they mix together, the alcohol becomes diluted, and the quality of the water also changes.”

“People are the same. Exactly the same.”

“Oh?”

“Some people change after they meet. If they meet a certain person, they will become weaker.”

“Just like the alcohol mixed into the water.”

“Correct. Chance meetings. Chance partings. Anyone would be helpless.” His voice was still completely indifferent. “There are many situations like this in heaven and on earth.

Sima laughed again.

“Why do you treat me so well?” he asked. “Why do you arrange everything so carefully for me?”

“Because you are Sima Chaoqun.” Zhuo Donglai’s answer was simple. “And because Sima Chaoqun must never be defeated.”

Part 2

During the Tang Dynasty, Gao Zong had the Great Wild Goose Pagoda built for his late mother, the Empress Wende(1). The preeminent monk Xuan Zang translated Buddhist sutras there(2). It originally had five stories, and was a Buddhist place of worship for the western regions. Later it was built up to seven stories, and became a Seven Story Buddhist Pagoda.

**

Gao Jianfei stood at the bottom of the Great Wild Goose Pagoda.

The pagoda cast no shadow, because the sky was too cloudy, and no sunlight existed to cast a shadow.

No shadow existed in Little Gao’s heart either. His heart was a blank space, with nothing in it at all.

But in his hand was a sword. A sword wrapped in coarse cloth, a sword that few people had ever seen. There was only a sword, no box.

She had not taken the box with her. She shouldn't have gone, and yet she left. She should have taken the box with her, and yet she didn't.

Little Gao left the box in the small room.

What should have stayed behind didn't, and what shouldn't have been left behind was still there?

He didn't know how long he had been there, and he didn't know when he had arrived.

He only knew that he was there, because he had already caught sight of Zhuo Donglai and Sima Chaoqun.

**

He wore a set of sharply contrasting black and white clothes (3). His eye, too, were sharply contrasting black and white. Snow white, pitch black. Whenever Sima Chaoqun made an appearance, this was the impression he made on people.

—Open, powerful, knowing the difference between right and wrong.

At this moment, in this silvery white world, all of the radiant glory and honor belonged to this person. Zhuo Donglai was only a mere shadow cast by his brilliance.

Zhuo Donglai seemed to know this, and hence would always stand to the side, so as not to obstruct the brightness.

The first thing that Little Gao noticed at was Sima Chaoqun's shining white eyes and black pupils.

If he walked a bit closer, and looked carefully, he might be able to see the traces of red in the whites of his eyes, strands of blood that seemed to be kindled by the burning fire of his heart.

But sadly, Gao Jianfei couldn't see.

Other than Zhuo Donglai, no one accompanied Sima Chaoqun.

“You are Gao Jianfei?”

“I am.”

Sima Chaoqun looked at Little Gao. Looked at his eyes, his facial expression, his appearance. The Giant Wild Goose Pagoda did not cast a shadow, and yet it seemed as if his entire person were enveloped by darkness.

Sima Chaoqun looked at him quietly for a long time, then suddenly turned around and began to leave.

Zhuo Donglai didn't obstruct his way, didn't move, didn't even blink.

Gao Jianfei rushed forward to bar his way.

“Why are you leaving?”

“Because I don't want to kill you. Beneath my sword, defeat is death.” In his coldness, he did not seem at all as if he had been drinking. “Actually, you should know already that you have been defeated. Because you are an empty person, as empty as a rice sack without a grain of rice in it.”

Neither an empty person nor an empty rice sack can stand up. Without standing up how could one achieve victory?

Anyone could understand this truth.

Except for Gao Jianfei.

Because he was already empty, and how can an empty person understand truth?

And so he started to unwrap his cloth bundle. The cloth bundle was not empty.

The sword inside the cloth bundle could take a person's life in an instant. And just the same, it could give another person justification to take his life in an instant.

Siima Chaoqun had stopped walking, and was looking off into the distance.

He wasn't looking at Gao Jianfei, because he knew that the young man was drawing his sword, and that there was no way to stop him.

He also didn't look at Zhuo Donglai, because he knew Zhuo Donglai would have no reaction to what was happening.

But in his eyes could be seen a faint look of sorrow.

—How could such a worthy life become so meaningless after encountering such circumstances?

His hand gripped his sword, because in a situation like this, he had no other choice.

**

A click sounded out as the sword was freed from the scabbard, but Sima Chaoqun did not draw it.

Because at that exact moment, the shadow of a person flitted down like a meteor from the top of the Giant Wild Goose Pagoda.

What dropped down from the top of the pagoda was not just a shadow, but a person. But the speed was incredible, so fast that Sima Chaoqun couldn't see the person clearly. He could only see a murky gray shadow that grabbed Gao Jianfei.

Then Gao Jianfei flew up, not gradually, but as fast as a bird.(4) In an instant, he had already reached the third story of the pagoda.

In the blink of an eye, the shadows of both people had already reached the seventh story of the Buddhist pagoda.

And then they disappeared from sight completely.

Sima Chaoqun was about to pursue when then he heard Zhuo Donglai speak. "You didn't want to kill him," he said coolly. "Why are you going to chase him?"

Part 3

It had stopped snowing. An old monk had brought tea and then left.

Sometimes coming, sometimes going, sometimes falling, sometimes stopping. The pitiless snowflakes and the indifferent old monk were both like this.

And people?

Aren't people this way too?

**

Sima Chaoqun again sat on the prayer mat, drinking from the same unfinished bottle of cold alcohol. A long time passed, then he suddenly asked Zhuo Donglai: "Who was that person?"

"Which person?"

Sima gave a cold laugh. "You know which person. The reason you told me not to give chase is because you were afraid of him."

Zhuo Donglai stood and walked to the window. He opened it, closed it, then turned to face Sima.

"There are many great masters in the martial world, and many unique skills. When two experts face each other, victory and defeat is usually determined by their current situation and circumstances. Ever since Little Li's Flying Dagger went into retirement, there are almost no truly unmatched experts left."

"Almost none left? Or absolutely none left?"

"I can't be certain." Zhuo Donglai's voice seemed a bit hoarse. "But someone once told me that in one of the lesser known places of the world, there is a person like that."

"Who?" Sima Chaoqun seemed suddenly excited. "Who is this person?"

"He is surnamed Xiao. The same character Xiao as the line from the poem, 'the desolate waters of the river Yishui.' His full name is Xiao Leixue." (5)

**

“The ghastly aura of the sword, the desolate waters of the river Yishui, Heroes shed no tears, their tears become righteous shed blood.”(6)

Gao Jianfei thought he must be sleeping. It had happened when he had started to unwrap his sword. He had suddenly fallen into a dream and flew up into the air.

Actually, he really couldn't tell what was a dream and what was real. When someone uses a delicate and ingenious method to seal your pressure points and send you into unconsciousness, you will usually be like this.

When he awoke, he heard someone singing softly. Within the quiet singing there seemed to be the ghastly spirit of a sword, and an indescribable, desolate melancholy.

“The wanderer sings three songs, and sings only for heroes;
The wanderer never settles down, the heroes shed no tears.”

**

The singing stopped suddenly, and the singer slowly turned around. A waxen, yellow face; a pair of tired, expressionless eyes; a set of simple gray clothes.

A quiet and ordinary person, whose hand clasped a solitary, old-fashioned, ordinary box.

Part 4

“Xiao Leixue!”

The cold alcohol burned like fire in Sima Chaoqun's heart and veins. And yet his heart was not warm. “What kind of person is he? Have you ever seen him?”

"I haven't. No one has ever seen him. Even if someone saw him, they wouldn't know who he was."

Part 5

The wind blew, urgent and cold. It was very urgent, and extremely cold.

They were up high, on the top level of the great seven story Buddhist pagoda.

"It's you. You again." Gao Jianfei looked around disappointedly. "Who are you anyway? Why did you bring me to another damn place like this?"

"This place isn't damned. But if I hadn't brought you here, someone's soul would have been damned. A soul dead and damned."

"And the dead, damned soul would be me?" (7)

"Yes."

"How do you know I would have died?"

"Because of your sword."

In the man's tired, expressionless eyes, there seemed to suddenly shine a bit of light. Just like the star that hangs forever on the horizon of the far north; remote, mysterious, and bright.

"Past events vanish like smoke; the famous swords of the past are buried deep. That sword of yours is an unparalleled weapon. No sword in the past five hundred years could match up to it."

"Oh?"

"The person who made it was the first great master to appear after Ou Yezi, and was also the greatest swordsman of his time.(8) But in his entire life, he never used this sword. In fact, he never even unsheathed it for others to see."

“Why?”

“Because the sword is too terrible. If it is unsheathed, it must drink human blood.”

His face was expressionless, covered as it was with wax-like disguise material. But in his eyes could be seen an unspeakable sadness.

“When this sword came out of the forge, the master could see its evil air, an incurable evil. And thus, he couldn’t help but shed tears. The tears dropped onto the sword, and left behind tearstains.”

“So that’s where the tearstains on the sword come from?”

“Yes.”

“If the master could see the demonic air of the sword, why didn’t he just destroy it?”

“Because the sword was created too perfectly. Who in the world,” he said, “would have the heart to take the perfect result of painstaking effort, and simply destroy it? Besides, after the sword left the forge, it became a magical weapon. Perhaps you could destroy its form, but not its spirit. And sooner or later, what it required would be paid.”

Little Gao finally understand what he meant. “There are some things in heaven and earth that cannot be exterminated.”

“And so, if you drew the sword today, then you would die under it. Because today, you were definitely not a match for Sima Chaoqun.” He stared at Little Gao. “Now you should be able to understand, the duel may be fair, but not completely.”

“Oh?”

“When a person reaches a certain point, and gains enough power, they can create situations to weaken an opponent’s power, and ensure their own victory. This type of thing usually leads others into extreme misery.” It was a fact. A cruel and ruthless fact.

Little Gao had no ability to offer denial. Because now he was finally beginning to see clearly, to learn the lesson of heartbreak.

“Therefore, if you really want to go up against Sima Chaoqun, the only method is to catch him by surprise, to assassinate him. Because you will never truly have an opportunity to have a fair fight with him.

Little Gao clenched his fists.

“Why are you telling me these things,” he asked. “Why did you save me?”

“I didn’t kill you, and I don’t want you to die by another’s hand.”

“And you don’t want this sword to fall into another’s hand.”

“Correct.” His answer was very straightforward.

“But you already have the most fearsome weapon in the world,” said Little Gao. “Don’t tell me you want this sword too?”

“I don’t,” he replied coolly. “If I wanted it, it would be mine already.”

Little Gao couldn’t argue with this point. “Then, what relationship do you have with it? Is there some special connection between you and the sword?”

The man’s hand suddenly shot forward and grasped Little Gao’s wrist.

Little Gao began sweating, a cold, painful sweat that covered his whole body.

He knew that he had touched his person, touched his heart in a way that he did not wish to be touched.

How could a person as strong and callous as this have a weak spot in his heart?

“Your box and my sword are both products of the same hand. Do you and I also have some special connection? Why don’t you tell me the truth?”

Little Gao had to ask these questions, even if his wrist shattered. He had to ask.

Unfortunately, he didn't get an answer.

The man had already let go of his wrist, and flown away.

A sheet of silvery white surrounded the giant pagoda; the man and his box disappeared like a snowflake into the whiteness.

**

The sky was beginning to darken. Little Gao stood there for a long time, thinking. There were many things he just couldn't figure out.

He could not collect his thoughts.

No matter what he started thinking about, he couldn't help but end up thinking about her.

—Who was she? Where did she come from? Where did she go?

—Who were the people trying to kill her? Did she really meet him because Sima Chaoqun wanted her to, because he wanted Little Gao to fall in love with her?

—Did she really leave because Sima Chaoqun wanted her to? In order to make Little Gao heartbroken and hopeless?

Regardless, Little Gao was determined to find her, and make things clear.

But, there was no way to find her.

He had no idea where to even start looking.

He was a young person making his way for the first time in Jianghu, with no experience, no friends, no one to help him. What was he supposed to do?

Other than using his sword to kill people, what was he capable of?

Who could he kill? Who should he kill?

Who could tell him?

**

The sky grew darker, the evening bell had sounded, and the fragrant aroma of congee and rice wafted up from the kitchen in the rear courtyard. A few monks, late to arrive, hurried back in their cleats to catch their evening meal.

The cleats treading on the ice and snow made Little Gao suddenly think of Zhu Meng.

Zhu Meng in Luoyang.

**

(1) Gao Zong was an emperor of the Tang dynasty. He built the pagoda when he was emperor. But his mother's posthumous title was Empress Wendeshunsheng (literally "the civil, virtuous, serene, and holy empress) or Empress Wende. <http://goo.gl/LfZHBS> <http://goo.gl/X2P8HO>

(2) Xuan Zang is of course the famous monk who's journey was the inspiration for the Chinese Classic "Journey to the West." <http://goo.gl/6TC025>

(3) The word used here to describe his clothes as black and white is an idiom that can also imply knowing the difference between right and wrong.

(4) Here is a little play on words, since his name "Jianfei" means to fly up gradually.

(5) Xiao Leixue's name is pretty unique, and doesn't sound like a real person's name. The Xiao part is a common surname, but the character itself also means "desolate or dreary," as Zhuo Donglai emphasizes when he explains which "xiao" character it is. Incidentally, that poem is from the Song Dynasty, and is a relatively sad poem written to a departing loved one. The Leixue part of his name contains two characters. The first is 泪 as in "tears." The second is 血 as in "blood." So his given name could also be literally translated as "Tears of Blood" or "Blood Tears."

(6) Okay, I apologize, but after knocking my head against the wall for, well for a while, I couldn't think of a really good colloquial way to translate the Chinese here. And the literal translation just doesn't make sense in English, and doesn't sound cool. There is some word play based on the expression

见鬼 jian gui, which literally means to see a ghost, but is usually translated as a mild epithet such as damn, or hell, or something like that. You see this expression in the subtitles of English movies a lot. The original Chinese is better than my translation, and here is how it would be literally translated: "Why did you suddenly again bring me to a 'see a ghost' place like this?"

"You cannot see ghosts in this place. But if I didn't bring you to this place, you would see a ghost. A newly dead ghost." "This newly dead ghost is me?"

(7) Ou Yezi was a famous sword maker from the Spring and Autumn period <http://goo.gl/Jd8I9R>

CHAPTER 1 – THE LION CLAN HALL OF COPPER CAMEL ALLEY

Part 1

The sixth day of the second month of the lunar calendar.

Luoyang.

Luoyang was the location of the capital of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty, the Northern Wei Dynasty, the Western Jin Dynasty, the Wei State during the Warring States period, the Sui Dynasty, the Later Tang Dynasty, and seven others. To its east lay Tiger Cage Pass, to the west the Guanzhong Plain, to the north the Yanyun Sixteen Prefectures, to the south the Jiangnan region.⁽¹⁾ Its palaces and watchtowers were magnificent.

Emperor Song Taizu's birthplace of Jia Ma Ying, the Temple of Eastern Greatness built during the later Tang Dynasty, Fu Fei from the "Rhapsody of the Goddess of Luo" by the poet Cao Zhi, Laozi's ancient residence in Copper Camel alley, the ancient bridge "Spring Waters under Tianjin," are all still there.

But Gao Jianfei's spirit was not there.

He hadn't come to visit these ancient and famous places. He'd come for one place, one person. He wanted to find the Lion Clan hall, Zhu Meng's Lion Clan.

And he found it.

The Lion Clan headquarters was located in Copper Camel alley, the same area as Laozi's ancient residence. It occupied almost the entire alley.

Little Gao found it very quickly.

In his imagination, the Lion Clan hall was an ancient and immense building. Even if it was not extremely imposing and beautiful, it would definitely be spacious and open, emanating loftiness, just like Zhu Meng himself.

He was correct. The Lion Clan hall really was like that. But there was one thing that he never imagined: that this ancient, immense, spacious building would be burned into rubble.

Other than a few rooms in the back, the Lion Clan hall, which had dominated Luoyang for so many years, had been completely destroyed by raging fire.

**

Gao Jianfei's heart sank.

The wind cut like a knife. The frigid breeze tossed some of the debris about in the rubble. Was it the remains of a wooden beam, or of a person's bones?

The Lion Clan hall, which in the past had constantly burst with visitors like snow in a snowstorm, was now devoid of even a single human shadow.

Copper Camel alley, a place filled with ancient legends and modern-day heroes, was now only filled with misery and somber melancholy.

Time brings great changes (2), and the affairs of people are in constant flux, but this type of change was too quick and too horrible.

—When did it happen? How did it happen?

—The daring, energetic and exceedingly proud Zhu Meng, his disciples, and his veteran experts... where had they gone?

**

Little Gao thought of Zhuo Donglai, about his methods, about his sinister and ruthless cool-headedness.

And now, he couldn't help but think about all the things that had happened that day in the snow-filled Red Flower Bazaar, all the details.

And he suddenly understood why Zhuo Donglai let Zhu Meng go that day.

With Zhu Meng in Chang'an, the defenses of the Luoyang headquarters would definitely be lax. His best opportunity was to dispatch people at double speed to launch a surprise attack.

Zhuo Donglai would certainly have been waiting for an opportunity like this for a long time.

The moment that he raised his glass to toast Zhu Meng, the surprise attack forces were most certainly already on their way.

And this was the result of that surprise attack.

During the exact time in which Zhu Meng felt the safest and most victorious, he had actually already been vanquished.

And this time his defeat was utterly brutal.

**

Little Gao's hands and feet were freezing.

He couldn't imagine how Zhu Meng would be able to handle such a massive strike, but he believed that he couldn't be completely knocked down.

As long as Zhu Meng lived, he couldn't be defeated by anyone.

And now the only thing Little Gao could think about was that Zhu Meng must be racing back to Chang'an to get revenge. And Zhuo Donglai would most definitely be waiting for him to return, a trap ready to be sprung.

If Zhu Meng had already reached Chang'an, then his chances of returning alive were small.

Anyone attacked in such a vicious way would definitely be filled with impatient fury and carelessness.

And the slightest bit of carelessness could lead to a fatal mistake.

Zhuo Donglai's plans were never the least bit careless, and when he thought about this, Little Gao's heart became cold. At that moment he made a decision.

He would return to Chang'an as quickly as possible. Whether, Zhu Meng was dead or alive, he would return.

If Zhu Meng was still alive, maybe he could help his friend.

He still had his two hands and a sword and his own life.

If Zhu Meng had already died under Zhuo Donglai's hands, then he could collect his friend's corpse, and then do everything in his power to seek revenge.

Regardless of anything, Zhu Meng was the only person who had ever considered him as a friend.

In fact, Zhu Meng was his only friend.

He didn't completely understand the meaning of the word "friend," because he had never had a friend before.

But he had spirit.

The spirit of chivalry, the spirit of courage, the spirit of brotherhood and loyalty.

—Because the world has people with this spirit, justice can prevail over evil, and humanity will continue to exist forever.

But unfortunately, at this moment, no matter where Gao Jianfei wanted to go, it would be very difficult to do so.

Part 2

What moments ago had been a quiet alley without a soul in it, was suddenly full of people.

A person wearing brown clothes appeared; no more than four feet tall, with a horse-like face nearly one foot wide. His eyebrows looked like two brooms tied together by a knotted piece of rope.

He did not appear to be very old, but had an air of maturity. The narrow eyes under his dense brows glittered. As soon as he caught sight of Little Gao, those eyes fixed onto him like nails.

Little Gao had seen this person before.

When you see a person like this, it's hard to forget them.

Little Gao remembered that he had been selling sliced rice cakes on the street outside the alley. He had been using a long, sharp, thin knife to cut the date-flavored sweet cakes.

The knife was currently sheathed at his waist.

It wouldn't be difficult to use this knife to cut a person into pieces.

**

As soon as he appeared, the alley suddenly filled with noise and people. It seemed as if everyone that had been outside on the main street suddenly entered, just like tidewater. And Little Gao was submerged.

Little Gao felt like he had suddenly walked into a lively temple fair. Every direction was filled with people, all kinds of people. Not even a drop of water could get through. One could not even move.

He wasn't really sure how to deal with the situation, because he had never encountered anything like this before.

The cake-seller had originally been right in front of him, but now he was nowhere to be seen.

He was too short, and to find him would be really difficult. But, if he wanted to use his knife to stab someone from within the crowd, it would be easier than cutting a cake.

Little Gao didn't want to be near a knife like that.

He had to find the man. It was obvious that he was some sort of leader.

"I want to buy sliced sweet cakes!" he suddenly called. "Whoever was selling the cakes, where did you go?"

"I didn't go anywhere," came the reply, a deep husky voice. "I'm right here."

The voice came from behind Little Gao. He turned around, but still couldn't see the man.

But he heard him call out again, and then he realized that he couldn't see him because he still hadn't lowered his head.

A person that short, in a crowd, can't be found unless you drop your head down.

"Can you see me?" asked Little Gao. "I still can't see you. How can we do business?"

"The problem is easy to solve."

Little Gao suddenly squatted down. He couldn't see the faces of the others in the crowd, but right in front of him was the long, wide horse-like face.

"Now we can do businesses, right?"

The man smiled, and the corners of his mouth nearly reached his ears. "You really want to buy sliced sweet cakes?"

"Other than buying cakes, is there any other business to discuss? Any other business to do?"

"No, there isn't."

"Then I'll just buy some sliced sweet cakes."

"How much do you want to buy?"

"How much can you sell?"

"As long as you pay the price, I can sell any amount."

"How expensive are your cakes?"

“That depends.”

“Depends on what?”

“Depends on the person.”

“Depends on the person?” Little Gao didn’t understand. “Selling sweet cakes depends on the person?”

“Of course it depends on the person. The price of the sweet cakes is determined by what type of person wants to buy.”

Adjusting the price based on the customer is definitely one of the secrets to successful business.

“For some people who want to buy sweet cakes, I sell them at two coins per half kilo. For other people, I won’t sell for even five hundred gold bars. Because I don’t like the way they look.”

“What about me,” asked Little Gao. “Do you like the way I look?”

The man examined him for a long time, from top to bottom. The narrow eyes underneath his heavy brows glittered like knives. “Did you come from Chang’an.”

“Yes.”

“What’s in that cloth package of yours? Is it a sword?”

“Yes.”

“The reason you came from Chang’an ... is it Great Master Zhu of the Lion Clan?”

“Yes.”

The man suddenly smiled again, revealing a set of ghastly white teeth. “Then I don’t think we can do business.”

“Why?”

“Because dead people can’t eat sweet cakes, and I don’t sell sweet cakes to dead people.”

**

Little Gao’s palms had already started sweating, a cold sweat.

If the people crowding in all directions suddenly pressed forward, they could easily crush him to death, and he would be powerless to stop them.

He could hear that some of the people in the crowd were breathing heavily from excitement. People usually get excited before killing.

The crowd began to press forward, and the cake-seller had already drawn the knife from his waist.

Little Gao suddenly realized something. The most frightening thing in the world is people; when manpower is pooled together, it is more frightening than any powerful thing in the world.

But he was still able to keep his cool. Because he could see that all these people were members of the Lion Clan. Like him, they had all stood by Zhu Meng. So he said, “I’m here from Chang’an, and my bundle does contain a deadly sword, but I’m not here to kill Zhu Meng.”

“Who are you here to kill?”

“I’m here to kill the same people as you. Because I’m the same as you, I’m a friend of Zhu Meng.”

“Oh?”

“I’m Gao, Gao Jianfei.”

“Are you the Gao Jianfei who wants to gradually fly?”

“Yes. You might as well go ask Zhu Meng if he has a friend like me.”

“I don’t need to ask.”

“Why?”

The cake-seller's narrow eyes suddenly shone with a crafty smile. He laughed at Little Gao.

"You think I don't know that you're Zhu Meng's friend?"

"You know?"

"It's because I know that I'm going to kill you."

**

Little Gao's back suddenly dripped with cold sweat.

The crowd once again began to surge forward. The cake-cutting knife was sharp, but in this short moment, he still had a chance to break the hand holding the knife, smash the nose in the middle of that horse-like face, and wipe the crafty, evil expression from those two eyes.

But he couldn't act rashly.

He could kill the man, but not the tide of people around him, not completely.

If he used this flitting moment to kill the man, then he would most likely be chopped to pieces by some other random blade.

The cake seller laughed again, a sinister laugh. "You're not dead yet, why haven't you made a move?"

Before he finished his sentence, Little Gao, who had been squatting in front of him, suddenly stood up. He stood up and then shot straight up, as if a giant hand had just grabbed his collar and lifted him up, like a hand picking a green onion out of the ground.

This was a lightness kung fu not often seen in Jianghu, a unique skill used to escape death.

Unfortunately, he was no bird, and didn't have wings.

His body relied on the strength of a single breath to fly up. As soon as the breath expired, his body would fall again, and when he fell he would descend back into the crowd of people.

He understood this.

He knew that the people below him had already drawn their weapons, and were ready to kill. They were just waiting for his power to be exhausted and for him to fall. And then, even if he drew his sword and killed some people, he too would inevitably die among the blood and corpses.

He didn't want that to happen, and he also didn't want to see the horrific sight of blood and flesh flying in every direction.

But he didn't die.

At that exact moment, he suddenly saw a long rope flying toward him.

He didn't see where the rope flew from, or whose hands it was in.

But luckily, he saw it, and was able to grab it.

The rope was pulled forward, pulling his body forward as well.

It pulled him along like a kite, flying higher and higher.

It seemed like the person pulling the rope was moving forward. Little Gao couldn't see the person, but he could hear a very familiar sound.

It was the sound of cleats running on snow.

Little Gao suddenly felt a warmth in his heart.

It was as if he could see a person, wearing a pair of cleats, grasping the tail of a horse, flying behind the horse like a kite.

It was as if he could see the person riding the horse, emanating an awe-inspiring and heroic spirit.

He'd known all along that Zhu Meng could not be knocked down by anyone.

Part 3

"Young Master Gao, I never thought you would come." Cleats had stopped running. He knelt onto the snowy ground. "The Clan Lord said you would come looking for him, but I didn't think Young Master Gao would really come."

It took quite a bit of strength for Little Gao to pull this faithful friend up from the snowy ground and onto his feet.

"The one kneeling should be me," he said to Cleats. "You saved my life."

Cleats dried a few hot tears that had forced their way out of his eyes, and once again his expression became stern.

"Your servant realized much earlier that Cai Chong would not let any of the Clan Leader's friends go free," said Cleats. "Almost all of the them have already met disaster under his treacherous hands. He hasn't let a single one escape, not even friends from distant places."

"Cai Chong is that cake-selling freak?"

"Exactly."

"He clearly isn't really a cake seller," said Little Gao. "Who is he, exactly?"

"He's the same as that joker named Yang. He used to be one of the Clan Lord's trusted aides."

"And just like Yang Jian, he betrayed the Clan Lord?"

"He's much more abominable than Yang Jian," said Cleats hatefully. "He betrayed the Clan Lord when he was most weak and hurt, when he needed help the most."

Little Gao understood. "When you two returned from Chang'an, not only was the Lion Clan hall already destroyed, but Cai Chong had also turned on you." Little Gao sighed. "Those two days must have been very difficult."

"Yes. Very difficult."

"But no matter how difficult the days are, they will pass."

“Yes.” Cleats repeated Little Gao’s words like a puppet: “They will pass.”

Suddenly, an indescribable expression of bitterness and grief shone from his eyes. It was the look of someone sinking down into quicksand, sinking so deep that they could never escape.

Little Gao suddenly felt a sinking feeling.

—Cai Chong betrayed Zhu Meng at his greatest time of need, and yet Zhu Meng still had let him live happily and freely in the world?

This wasn’t Zhu Meng’s style.

Little Gao looked at Cleats’ eyes, and very slowly asked him, “You don’t dare to tell me, do you?”

Cleats suddenly seemed anxious. “Don’t dare to tell you what?”

Little Gao gripped his shoulder forcefully. “Has your Clan Lord already fallen victim of some murderous scheme?”

“He hasn’t.”

“He really hasn’t?”

“He really hasn’t.” Cleats seemed to be trying to put on a cheerful expression. “Your servant can take Young Master Gao to see him right now.”

Part 4

A withered forest packed with snow, a hideous looking crag.

In front of the crag burned a fire, and sitting on top of the crag was a person.

It was a person who seemed to have lost their essence, like a vulture who for a very long time hasn’t seen a corpse.

The flames flickered on the person’s face.

It was a face filled with loneliness, hopelessness and sorrow. The thick brows were furrowed in anxiety, and the exhausted eyes, sunken deeply into the cheekbones, gazed fixedly into the fire, as if they expected a miracle to spring forth from the flames.

It was Zhu Meng.

“Fierce Lion” Zhu Meng had always been a strong and courageous person, a true man that no one could knock down.

Cleats prostrated himself before the stone. “Reporting in to Clan Leader. The person Clan Leader most wants to see is now here.”

**

Little Gao did not shed a tear.

Tears filled his eyes and threatened to roll down, but he did not shed a single one.

He hadn’t shed tears for many years.

Zhu Meng had raised his head and looked at him blankly, as if he had no idea who was standing in front of him.

Little Gao hung his head.

Now he understood the look of despair in Cleats’ eyes. He didn’t understand how the heroic man who that day in Red Flower Bazaar had on horseback slain a man in the blink of an eye, could possibly be knocked down as easily as this.

“Little Gao, Gao Jianfei.”

Zhu Meng suddenly let out a savage shout, then leaped down from the rock, rushed forward and embraced Little Gao.

In this moment, it seemed as if he was suddenly full of vitality again. “I knew you would come, and here you are.”

He held Little Gao tightly, his face pressing against Little Gao’s.

He laughed, a hearty laugh at the top of his lungs, just as he had laughed that day in Red Flower Bazaar when he had beheaded his opponent.

But Little Gao suddenly realized that his face was wet.

—Was someone shedding tears? Who was shedding tears?

**

“The wanderer sings three songs, he doesn’t sing sorrowful melodies, In the world of mortals, there are already too many sorrowful things. The wanderer sings a song for the king, urging the king not to shed tears, if some injustice exists in the world of men, drink to excess, brandish a blade and sever heads.”

Part 5

An iron spear and a copper pot. A pot of unfiltered rice wine.

A fire.

Cleats hung the pot over the fire with the spear to heat the wine. Cold wind whistled through the branches of the pine trees. The wine was not yet hot.

But Little Gao’s blood was hot.

“Zhuo Donglai,” said Zhu Meng. “That bastard really is a freaking character.” He had already drunk three pots full of wine. “Even though he attacked my old lair, I have to admire him.” As his belly filled with the rice wine, his heroic spirit began to rejuvenate. “But admire or not, sooner or later the day will come when I’ll cut off his head and use it as a chamber pot.”

Little Gao looked at him for a long time. “Why haven’t you gone after him yet?”

Zhu Meng suddenly stood up, then slowly sat down again, his face once again covered with a look of despair and sorrow.

"I can't go now," said Zhu Meng. "If I go, she'll be dead for sure."

"Who will be dead? A woman?" (3)

Zhu Meng shook his head. He said nothing, but instead took a drink.

"Is it also because of her that you don't kill Cai Chong?" asked Little Gao.

Zhu Meng shook his head again. After a long time, he responded in a hoarse and broken voice: "Do you know how many people that little son of a bitch took with him?"

"How many did he take?"

"All of them."

"All of them?" Little Gao was shocked. "Don't tell me all the disciples of the Lion Clan are following him?"

"Other than Cleats, they were all bought over by him. These past few years, he's been managing the funds for me. All of the wealth going in and out of the Lion Clan went through his hands. I never paid any attention to it."

"So you think that going after him would be useless, because he has more men than you."

Zhu Meng didn't admit it. It seemed the heroic spirit just recently awakened by the strong alcohol had suddenly vanished again.

He held the wine bowl with two gaunt hands, drinking one mouthful at a time of scalding liquor. Other than the bowl of wine, it seemed he didn't care about anything in the world.

Little Gao felt stabbed to the heart.

He suddenly realized that not only had Zhu Meng's appearance deteriorated, his heart had also begun to rot.

Before, if he knew someone who had betrayed him still walked the streets waiting to assassinate his friends, even a thousand men and horses couldn't

protect that person. He would ride on horseback, brandishing his blade, to find that person and behead them.

—Maybe that was one of the main reasons why the disciples of his clan had betrayed him.

Who in Jianghu would be willing to follow a leader who had lost their courage?

Little Gao truly could not understand how such a strong and stalwart man could change in this way. And how could he change so quickly?

He didn't ask Zhu Meng.

Zhu Meng was already drunk. He got drunk much more quickly than before.

It seemed that his mighty bones only had a layer of thin flesh on them. Now that he was drunk, he looked like the skeleton of a fierce lion.

Little Gao couldn't bear to look at him again.

The firelight still flickered as Cleats continued to heat wine. Cleats didn't look at him. His eyes were yet again filled with that look of hopelessness bitterness and pain.

Little Gao stood up and walked over, and handed him his bowl of wine.

Cleats hesitated, but finally drank a mouthful.

Little Gao took the iron spear from him, and then poured another bowl of wine, drank it, and sighed. "I didn't misjudge you. You really are a good friend."

"Your servant is not the Clan Lord's friend." Cleats' expression was very solemn. "I'm not worthy."

"You're wrong. In this world, you might be his only true friend. And only you are worthy to be his friend!"

"Your servant isn't worthy," Cleats said again. "I don't dare to think in that way."

“But you are the only person who stuck with him.”

“That’s because my life belongs to him. Your servant will follow him forever.”

“But look at what he’s become.”

“It doesn’t matter what he becomes, he’s still my Clan Lord,” said Cleats resolutely. “That will never change.”

“Seeing him change so much, aren’t you hurt in your heart?”

Cleats didn’t say anything.

Little Gao poured another bowl of wine, watched Cleats drink it, then let out another sigh. “I know that your heart must feel as bad as mine. And you must also hope that he can pull himself together again.”

Cleats said nothing.

Little Gao stared at him. “Unfortunately, I can’t think of any way to help him.”

Cleats drank another bowl. This time he had poured it for himself.

Little Gao also drank another bowl, then in a loud voice said, “You can’t think of a way, but I can think of a way.”

Cleats suddenly lifted his head and stared at Little Gao.

“But first you must tell me, how come he is acting like this?” Little Gao was also staring at Cleats. “Is it really because of a woman?”

“Young Master Gao,” Cleats said, seemingly on the verge of tears. “Why do you have to ask me about this?”

“I have to ask. To cure a sickness, you must first determine the cause of the illness.”

Cleats had seemed ready to speak out, but he suddenly shook his head forcefully. “Your servant can’t say. Dares not say.”

“Why?”

Cleats simply sat down and put his head in his hands, ignoring Little Gao.

—Why had Zhu Meng changed in this way? Was it really because of a woman?

—Who was this woman? Where was she? Why didn’t Cleats dare to talk about it?

**

The night grew deeper, colder. The fire was dying.

Struggling a bit, Cleats stood up and then quietly said, “Your servant needs to find some more firewood for the fire.”

Before he could walk off, Zhu Meng, dreaming drunkenly, let out a roar.

“Die Wu, you can’t go.”(4) He shouted again hoarsely. “You’re mine, no one can take you away from me.”

This roar seemed like a whip slashing at Cleats’ body.

He suddenly began trembling.

Zhu Meng turned over and continued sleeping. Little Gao barred Cleats’ way, grasping his shoulders.

“It’s Die Wu, it’s definitely Die Wu,” he said. “Zhu Meng must have changed in this way because of her.”

Cleats lowered his head, and at long last admitted that this was the truth.

“Is she still in Luo Yang?” asked Little Gao

“She’s not. When your servant and the Clan Leader were returning from Chang’an that night, people attacked the Lion Clan Hall in the middle of the night. Cai Chong was on duty, and because of his laxness, the enemy succeeded easily. Not only did they burn down the Lion Clan hall, they killed more than forty of our brothers, and then just swaggered off.”

“They were definitely sent by Zhuo Donglai.”

“They must have been,” said Cleats. “Not only were they professionals, they also were very familiar with our internal situation.”

“The Lion Clan must have been infiltrated by some of Zhuo Donglai’s men.”

“Therefore, some people suspect that Cai Chong intended to betray the Clan Leader all along. Others say that he was lax in his watch and feared punishment by the Clan Leader, and so therefore betrayed him.”

“Did Die Wu go along with Cai Chong?”

Cleats shook his head. “Miss Die never liked that idiot, how could she go along with him?”

“Don’t tell me she was kidnapped by Zhuo Donglai’s men? He wants to use her as a hostage to threaten Zhu Meng?”

Cleats sighed. “It’s for this very reason that the Clan Leader isn’t willing to go to Chang’an to settle accounts with Sima.”

“Even if Cai Chong hadn’t gone against him, he still wouldn’t go?”

“Most likely not. If the Clan Leader went to Chang’an,” he said sadly, “those bastards would probably bring out Miss Die immediately and put her to the sword.” He yet again seemed to be on the verge of tears. “The Clan Lord told me before, as long as Miss Die is able to live a good life, he can deal with any sort of suffering.”

“So it’s because of this Miss Die that your Clan Leader has become so depressed, not willing to do a single thing. And Cai Chong can strut around the streets doing whatever he wants.”

“Your servant never thought the Clan Leader would become so infatuated with a woman. Even in my dreams I never imagined it.”

At first, Cleats thought that Little Gao would find the whole thing very ridiculous. Pitiful and ridiculous.

But he was wrong.

He suddenly noticed that Little Gao's eyes were also filled with sorrow; he stared blankly out into the darkness.

—A nameless woman, a romantic love that could never be forgotten.

Of course, Cleats didn't know about this. After a long time he heard Little Gao speaking in a soft and sentimental tone: "Your Clan Leader hasn't changed. He's still a man. Only true men can care about others. If he didn't care at all about the lives of others, you wouldn't stick with him."

"Correct." Cleats seemed afraid to say more. But after a few moments, he gathered his courage and said, "Young Master Gao, there's something your servant would like to say to you."

"Go ahead."

"Everyone should care about others. But to torment oneself because of others isn't correct. Doing that will only cause the people you care about to be hurt and disappointed."

Little Gao gave a forced laugh, and then changed the topic.

"There's a spot over there that's protected from the wind. I'm going to sleep a bit. You should sleep as well."

**

The world was silent. The only sound that could be heard was the crackling of the dead firewood.

Cleats placed a thick felt blanket onto the rock and rolled Zhu Meng onto it, then covered him with two more felt blankets. Afterwards, he laid onto the cold rock next to Zhu Meng and fell asleep, shrunken up like a shelled shrimp.

Before daybreak, the cold woke him, and discovered that Little Gao had already awakened.

In the dim early-morning light, he could see Little Gao washing his face with snow. And it looked as if he was unwrapping the bundle he always carried.

Cleats couldn't see if it was a sword inside the bundle, let alone what the sword looked like.

He didn't dare to look closely.

He pretended that he didn't see anything at all.

But his heart pounded, pounded oh so quickly.

Part 6

By the time Zhu Meng woke up, the sky was bright. Cleats had woken earlier, and was boiling water at the fire.

Little Gao was gone.

Zhu Meng sat up, looking around with bloodshot eyes. Little Gao was nowhere to be seen.

He let out a low animal-like growl from his throat."

"He left too?" he asked Cleats. "When did he go? Where did he go? Is he coming back?"

"Your servant must report to Clan Leader, when Young Master Gao left, he didn't say anything, and I'm not sure where he went. But Clan Leader should be able to figure it out, because Young Master Gao is Clan Leader's friend."

Zhu Meng had grown listless from sorrow and disappointment, but when he heard these words come forth from Cleats' mouth, he suddenly roused himself. His bloodshot eyes shone as he rose to his feet.

"You're right. I definitely should know where he went. Cleats," he said in a strong voice, "We must go too."

“Yes.” Cleats’ spirit also seemed to be roused, and there were tears in his eyes as he said, “Your servant already prepared everything. Your servant has always been ready. Your servant has been waiting all day.”

**

(1) These are all geographical references. Here are links if you would like more information. Tiger Cage/Hulao pass: <http://goo.gl/vgNGYy>.

Guanzhong Plain: <http://goo.gl/6iwrvc>. Sixteen

Prefectures: <http://goo.gl/ILCbsC>. Jiangnan region: <http://goo.gl/9m7ZU>

(2) This is a cool idiom which literally translates something like “from seas into mulberry fields.

(3) I fudged a bit in the translation because in spoken Chinese there is no distinction between “he” and “she.” When you refer to someone, it’s generally not clear which gender you’re talking about unless you specify.

(4) This name is comprised of two characters. The first character 蝶 “die” is from the word “butterfly.” In case you’re not familiar with Chinese pronunciation, it’s not pronounced like the English word die, but phonetically like “dyeh.” The second character 舞 “wu” means “dance.” So her name literally could be translated “Butterfly Dance.”

CHAPTER 8 – NO TURNING BACK

Part 1

The seventh day of the second month of the lunar calendar.

Luoyang.

Cai Chong sat on a stool made from four pieces of wood and a strip of canvas. He looked at the crowds of people on the street, his face gloomy. Anyone could see that he wasn't in a good mood today.

Little Gao had been a turtle in a jar, a fish in a net. Who could have imagined that at the very last moment he would slip from his grasp?

Maybe it was because everything Cai Chong did usually went so smoothly, and succeeded so quickly. Therefore it led to this kind negligence.

Actually, during this period of time, he hadn't forgotten about Zhu Meng.

He knew Zhu Meng hadn't left Luoyang. If he really went looking, he could find him.

But he didn't go looking, not because he was ashamed, but because he didn't dare.

Even though he had assumed Zhu Meng's position, he still had an unspeakable fear of him deep in his heart.

This fear had taken root in his heart during his years of service under Zhu Meng.

Even now, when he thought of Zhu Meng, his hands and feet would grow cold, and his body would break out in sweat. Sometimes he would be woken by nightmares in the middle of the night, then lie alone in bed drenched with sweat, trembling.

He wanted Zhu Meng to come looking for him.

He had already filled the entire street with deadly traps and ambushes. A word from him, and everything would be sprung. Even if Zhu Meng was at the top of his form, he still wouldn't be able to escape.

And so, early every morning, he would sit there selling sliced sweet cakes, using himself as bait to lure in the big fish Zhu Meng.

Even though this was dangerous, as long as Zhu Meng was alive he would never be able to get a good night's rest for the rest of his life.

It was a busy street, filled with teahouses, flower shops, and food stalls. Even early in the morning it was very busy. Right now it was early, and packed with people, just as it had been the past two days. About half of the people filling the street were waiting in ambush. Among them were members of the Lion Clan, but some were also mercenaries from distant places. (1)

These people would do anything for money.

Zhu Meng had never seen any of them before, and they had no feeling whatsoever for him.

Even if some of the old members of the Lion Clan were like Cai Chong, fearful of Zhu Meng, and hesitant to make a move at the moment of truth, these mercenaries had no family and were desperate.

When he thought about this, Cai Chong felt a little more at ease. And at that same moment, he saw someone walking down the street.

"Little Gao, Gao Jianfei!"

Cai Chong could barely believe his eyes.

The person who had narrowly escaped death yesterday was now coming back especially to deliver up his life.

Part 2

Little Gao wore only a coarse pair of trousers. He had thrown his gown over his shoulder.

Face flushed, eyes bloodshot, he clearly hadn't had much sleep.

But he seemed in good spirits, calm and unruffled, not very much different from the people nearby who had come to have morning tea.

Those who recognized him stared in shock, their eyes filling with murderous intent.

Little Gao didn't care a whit.

Many were already preparing to make a move, but strangely, Cai Chong didn't give the signal, even as Little Gao walked up right in front of him.

Little Gao stood in front of Cai Chong's cake-filled wooden table. There were several layers of cakes on the table, each covered with coarse cloth. Little Gao threw two coins onto the table and looked at Cai Chong.

"I want to buy two coins worth of sweet cakes. I want the kind with dates."

Cai Chong looked at him for a long time, then laughed. "You really came to buy sweet cakes?"

"What you're selling is sweet cakes, of course what I'm buying is sweet cakes. What's strange about that? What's funny about it?"

"It's definitely not funny, not funny at all. It's definitely something to weep about."

"Then why aren't you crying?"

"Because the one who should be crying is you."

"Oh?"

"You're still alive." Cai Chong asked him coldly, "Do you know why you're still alive?"

"I don't know."

"Because I want to ask you something," said Cai Chong. "Why did you come here? Are you here to speak for Zhu Meng? Give me his requirements? Beg for leniency?"

Little Gao looked at him, for a long time, and then sighed. "I guess people can't hide their true intentions from you."

Cai Chong laughed again.

"Actually, Zhu Meng can come himself. No matter what, we are still brothers." Cai Chong seemed to be very sincere in what he said. "As long as there aren't any excessive requirements, I'm willing to comply with anything he requests."

"Really?"

"Of course. I really don't want to beat around the bush with him. His lair was turned upside-down, everyone's exhausted and has suffered losses. Having outsiders come to take advantage doesn't do any good at all, right?"

"You're right, there's nothing good about it at all."

"So you might as well go back and tell him that yourself. I'm sure you can tell that I'm acting in good faith."

"Of course I can tell. I just think it's a bit strange."

"What's strange?"

"Don't tell me you never thought that I might have come here to kill you for Zhu Meng?"

Cai Chong smiled, and his narrow, knife-like eyes seemed to be filled with amusement. "You're a smart person. How could you do something like that? This street is filled with my people. If you make a single move, any and all of them could kill you. There's no way you could escape death."

"I believe it," said Little Gao. "I can see exactly what you're talking about."

“You’re still young, you have a lot of bright prospects. You don’t have a very deep relationship with Zhu Meng; why would you give up your life for him?” Cai Chong smiled and shook his head. “You definitely wouldn’t do something like that.”

Little Gao also smiled. “You’re completely correct. Even the stupidest idiot under heaven would do something like that.”

Cai Chong smiled, a smile filled with joy.

And as his smile was the most joyful, he suddenly saw an undulating flash of light, and then a sharp sword stabbed into his heart.

**

The smile froze, just like the smile on a poorly constructed wooden mask.

In that exact moment, all the sound and movement on the street seemed to freeze. And then in the same moment, everything seemed to explode, as if the street had turned into a pot of boiling congee on a burning oven.

The only person who could maintain their calm was Little Gao.

What he had come to accomplish, must be accomplished, regardless of the prospects of success or defeat, regardless of the prospects of life or death. He hadn’t thought about those things.

Now, his mission was accomplished. He had seen with his own eyes the traitor receive his just reward. He didn’t care about anything else.

But, even though he didn’t care, others cared.

**

The crowds of people, in turmoil, still hadn’t made a move. Suddenly, a huge shadow filled the sky as a person dropped down next to Little Gao and grasped his hand.

“This is my friend,” Zhu Meng roared like a fierce lion. “Touch him over my dead body!”

(1) The word I'm translating as mercenary is usually translated as desperado or outlaw. I think in this context mercenary is a better translation, but the implication is that they are lawless desperate Jianghu wanderers.

CHAPTER 4 – HE WU

Part 1

The eight day of the second month of the lunar calendar.

Chang'an.

Four carrier pigeons flew from Luoyang. One lost its way in the frosty darkness. One had its wings frozen by the frigid wind, and fell to its death in the lofty mountains outside Luoyang. Only two flew all the way to Chang'an, arriving before daybreak on the eighth.

**

"Cai Chong is dead," Zhuo Donglai calmly told Sima Chaoqun. "Yang Jian died here in Chang'an. Two more of ours died in the surprise attack. Of Zhu Meng's Four Great Warriors, not a single one remains alive."

Sima was enjoying his roasted beef. All his energy for the day came from this meal, and so this was the time when his spirits were the highest, and his mind the clearest.

"When did Cai Chong die?" he asked.

"Yesterday morning," answered Zhuo Donglai. "I just received news of his death a few hours ago."

One of his subordinates was an expert in training carrier pigeons. When he dispatched people to Luoyang to gather information, they would usually take one or two carrier pigeons with them. At the time, there was no faster method to deliver information.

"From what I heard," said Sima Chaoqun dryly, "Cai Chong had already taken complete control of the Lion Clan. How could he suddenly be dead? Someone like him shouldn't die so easily."

“Anyone who gets stabbed through the heart with a sword will die easily.”

“But it shouldn’t be an easy thing to stab him through the heart with a sword. Whose sword was it?”

“Little Gao’s. Gao Jianfei.”

“Him again!” Sima Chaoqun sliced off a big chunk of meat with his curved knife. “He’s already in Luoyang?”

“It seems he arrived two days ago.”

Sima Chaoqun chewed slowly, until all the flavor of the meat was gone. “Cai Chong is obviously no match for Gao Jianfei’s sword skill, but he already took control of the Lion Clan. Shouldn’t he have been surrounded by experts protecting him?”

“It’s said the whole street was filled. Not only were there Lion Clan disciples, but at least 10 hired killers, outsiders. Any enemy of his who entered that street would have been in as much danger as a lamb in the midst of a wolf pack.”

“But Little Gao went anyway.”

“Correct. Little Gao went, alone. One person, one sword. He walked down the street like an old woman carrying a basket of vegetables to sell.”

“And then what?”

“Then he stabbed Cai Chong through the heart with his sword. In through his chest and out through his back.”

“Why would Cai Chong let him get so close? Why wouldn’t he kill him first?”

“I have no idea. I imagine Cai Chong wanted to use Little Gao to lure out Zhu Meng and kill him. And he probably didn’t take Little Gao seriously. He never imagined he would have the guts to kill him under those circumstances.”

“Then his death was not undeserved,” Sima said coldly. “Anyone who underestimates their enemy deserves to die.”

Cai Chong not only underestimated Little Gao's speed and martial arts, he also underestimated his character and bravery.

Sima suddenly sighed. "But Little Gao must have died as well. When he went to that street, he had already prepared himself to die. Zhu Meng is really lucky to have made a friend like that."

"There really aren't many people like him in the world. For one to die is really a loss. But as of now, the world hasn't experienced that loss."

"Little Gao isn't dead?"

"He isn't."

"Right now he might even be living a happier life than most people."

"Why?"

"Because he didn't make a mistake when he picked his friend," said Zhu Donglai. "Zhu Meng didn't let him risk his life alone."

"Don't tell me Zhu Meng was there too?" Sima looked even more shocked than before. "He watched helplessly while Cai Chong took everything away from him, and then ran away and hid like a stray dog. At a time like that, how could he have the guts to show up?"

"I thought he was finished. As finished as a walnut cracked open by a hammer, the insides so soft that even a toothless child could chew it up."

"But now it looks like he grew another shell."

"Yes."

"How did he make his appearance?"

A thoughtful expression appeared in Zhuo Donglai's eyes. He was quiet for a long time before slowly saying, "Some trees seem completely dead during winter, but as soon as spring comes and they feel the spring wind and rain, receive the warmth of the sun, they fill with life again, extruding buds and growing new leaves." His voice seemed very distant. "Some friends can have

this kind of effect. Just like the spring wind and rain, and the warmth of the sun. As far as Zhu Meng is concerned, Gao Jianfei is this kind of friend.”

Sima Chaoqun sighed softly. “He is. As far as anyone is concerned, he is.”

Zhuo Donglai became thoughtful again, his gray, wolfish eyes shining with an expression no one could understand or describe, their sharpness seeming to gradually soften.

Sima Chaoqun didn’t notice. He continued, “Most of the people Cai Chong placed on the street in ambush were Zhu Meng’s old subordinates. When they suddenly saw him return, as awe-inspiring as ever, they must have been frightened. Even more so after seeing Cai Chong die under Little Gao’s sword.” He reached his conclusion: “All Zhu Meng had to do was appear, and have some spirit, and most of those people wouldn’t dare to make a move.”

Zhuo Donglai maintained his silence.

Sima kept talking. “The people Cai Chong paid such a high price for would be even less willing to make a move.”

“Why?”

“Because they have a price. If Cai Chong could buy them, Zhu Meng could buy them too.” His voice was filled with disdain. “People who come for a price aren’t worth it, not worth even one coin.”

Zhuo Donglai said nothing.

“And so because Cai Chong forgot these two points,” said Sima, “Zhu Meng and Little Gao are still alive.” He let out a short breath, seeming to be very satisfied with his assessment of things.

When Zhuo Donglai had absolutely no reaction at all, Sima couldn’t hold back from asking, “Don’t tell me you have a different opinion?”

Zhuo Donglai shook his head.

Sima Chaoqun frowned. “After Zhu Meng arrived, what happened?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” Sima Chaoqun was almost shouting. “How could you not know?”

After a long moment’s thought, Zhuo Donglai responded coolly, “Because that information didn’t reach me. The information is carried by pigeons. Pigeons don’t talk, they only carry things. And they aren’t eagles. The road from Luoyang to Chang’an is not short; the messages they carry can only be so long.” Zhuo Donglai’s voice carried no emotion whatsoever. “This matter could only be explained fully by a very long message, and so they split the message into four parts, and put each part onto a different pigeon.”

“And how many pigeons did you receive?”

“Two. Two pigeons, two messages.”

“Which two parts?”

“The first part, and the last part.”

“What you just told me was obviously the first part,” said Sima Chaoqun. “What about the last part?”

“The last part is the conclusion, and there are only a few lines. I can read it for you.”

He read the message: “Twenty-three people died in the battle, nineteen were critically injured, eleven received minor injuries. The casualties were brutal, the stench of blood from the battle lingered for a very long time. It was a massacre, with only Zhu Meng and Gao Jianfei getting away unharmed.” (1)

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Zhuo Donglai finished reading. Time passed, and finally Sima let out a long sigh. “More people died than were critically injured, and more people were critically injured than received minor injuries. One can only imagine how tragic it was.”

“Yes,” said Zhuo Donglai coolly. “And it’s clear that no one was unwilling to make a move.”

“The street was like a bag full of gunpowder. All it would take would be for one person to dare to make a move. That person would be the struck match. Once that person made a move, the whole bag of gunpowder would ignite, and they would all try to tear Zhu Meng and Gao Jianfei to pieces.”

“Yes. It seems that’s exactly what happened.”

“But Zhu Meng and Gao Jianfei still live.”

“Yes. They are very much alive.”

“How could only the two of them stand up to so many?”

“It wasn’t just the two of them. There were three people.”

“Who was the other person?”

“Cleats.”

“Cleats?”

“Not a pair of shoes,” said Zhuo Donglai, “a person.”

“How is his martial arts?”

“Nothing special.”

“But it seems you respect him.”

“Yes,” admitted Zhuo Donglai. “I always have respect for useful people.”

“He’s useful?”

“Very useful. Perhaps more useful than any of Zhu Meng’s other subordinates.”

“Because he was willing to die at any time for Zhu Meng?”

"Dying isn't horrible, and he wouldn't die at any time. As long as Zhu Meng lives, he would definitely think of a way to continue living, so that he can take care of him. He views Zhu Meng the way that a faithful dog views its master." Zhuo Donglai continued coldly: "If he was willing to throw his life away at any time, he wouldn't be worth paying attention to."

Sima Chaoqun suddenly laughed. A hearty laugh. "I know what you mean," he said. "I really do."

Zhuo Donglai looked at him coldly, his cold eyes shining forth with a look more fearsome and furious than a blade. He suddenly spun around and strode away.

Part 2

Beneath the gloomy sky, the sound of the snowflakes slowly falling drifted in through the window. This sound can only be heard at times when people are extremely lonely.

Sima's laughter had long since ceased, and no sign of joy could be seen in his eyes. Instead, they shone with unspeakable sadness.

He heard the sound of the falling snowflakes, but he didn't hear the sound of his wife's footsteps.

By the time Wu Wan entered, he had already begun drinking.

She walked in very quietly, and sat down by his side.

She never tried to prevent him from drinking, because as an intelligent woman, a kind-hearted and understanding wife, she knew that some things could not be prevented.

But today was different than usual. Today, she too began drinking, and drinking very quickly at that.

It wasn't until she was preparing to drink her third bowl that Sima turned and looked at her.

“It’s still morning, isn’t it?”

“It seems so.”

“And you’re already drinking.”

“It seems so,” Wu Wan replied lightly.

A gentle wife, extremely gentle, she always did everything for her husband and listened to him in every matter, always speaking softly and gently even when she was upset or angry. She never lost her temper.

But what Sima Chaoqun said was: “You only start drinking this early when you’re upset. Why are you upset today?”

She didn’t respond, didn’t even open her mouth.

She poured more wine, a blank expression on her face, filling both her own bowl and her husband’s.

“I know why you’re upset,” said Sima. “It’s because of Zhuo Donglai. You don’t approve of the way he spoke to me?”

Wu Wan didn’t deny his statement, thus confirming it.

“But you should understand that he normally isn’t like this,” said Sima. “He was angry today, because I kept praising Little Gao.” His eyes shone with a derisive smile. “He never likes it when I praise others for being good friends.”

Wu Wan suddenly spoke: “Don’t tell me he’s jealous?” Her voice was somewhat raised, and filled with a sneer. “I’m not jealous, what right does he have to be jealous?”

Wu Wan was always gentle, very gentle. But as of now she had already drunk five cups of wine.

She drank Sima’s preferred alcohol, which was strong liquor. The strongest of liquors.

When a woman who doesn't normally drink suddenly downs five cups of strong liquor, anything she says should be forgivable.

In fact, even when a man who doesn't normally drink suddenly downs five cups of strong liquor, anything he says should also be forgivable.

So Sima laughed.

"You're jealous. You've always been jealous of Zhuo Donglai, as if I would develop romantic feelings toward him."

"I know you won't develop romantic feelings toward him, and he hasn't done so toward you." She downed another drink. "You view him as a son. Without him, you wouldn't be where you are today."

Her voice hoarse, she whispered, "Why can't you do something for yourself, let him know that you can survive without him? Why can't you give him some proof?"

Sima didn't respond, didn't even open his mouth.

As his wife just had, he quietly poured more alcohol, filling his bowl and hers.

But Wu Wan didn't drink any more. She fell into his arms weeping, unable to speak.

Sima shed no tears. In fact, his eyes did not contain even a single teardrop.

It seemed as if he had no tears left in him at all.

Part 3

Behind the grand and magnificent house, in a wide and beautiful garden, was a secluded corner. In that corner was a very narrow door, from behind which could occasionally be heard the faint melody of a stringed instrument. No one knew what lay beyond the door, or who played the instrument.

That was because the area beyond the door was a restricted area designed by Zhuo Donglai. If anyone dared set foot inside with their right foot, then their right foot would be cut off. If they stepped in with their left foot, their left foot would be cut off.

It was a very simple rule. Simple and effective.

**

Whether leaving from Sima's residence or Zhuo Donglai's, it took a long time to reach this place.

Zhuo Donglai carried an oilskin umbrella, treading carefully across the snow-filled garden. Snow covered the narrow path upon which he walked, and even though he did not use lightness kung fu, he left behind only very faint footprints.

The narrow door in the corner was closed year-round.

Zhuo Donglai knocked softly. First three times, then one time. Then he waited for a long time before the door finally opened a crack.

A beautiful woman opened it. She wore a snow-white, fox-fur cloak, and her face was as white as the cloak.

In a very low, very reverent voice, Zhuo Donglai asked, "Is the old master up?" (2)

"He's been up for some time," said the woman, her voice faint. "The old master always gets up early. Perhaps he knows that the days to come are few, so he wishes to treasure each and every day."

Behind the door was a quiet and secluded little courtyard. The refreshing fragrance of plums filled the cold wind. Underneath an ancient, crooked pine tree was a small six-sided pavilion. An old man sat in the pavilion, watching the snowflakes drift down, seemingly spellbound.

No one knew his age or his name, even he himself had forgotten.

Short and emaciated, from a distance, he appeared to be a child of eight or nine years old. His head looked like a soft nut, dried out by the wind, and

the wrinkles on his face seemed to have been carved out by snow and rain, and gave evidence of countless experiences and sufferings.

Even though merciless time had left his body withered and shrunken, his eyes were filled not only with the flickering wisdom of age, but also the mischievousness of a child.

Right now, his eyes looked like the sparkling sea at noon.

Zhuo Donglai stood in the small courtyard reverently, and gave a respectful salute. "The old master's complexion looks much better than before. He looks at least twenty years younger."

At first it seemed as if the old man had no intention of looking at him, and would just ignore him. But he suddenly turned his head and winked.

"You really think I look twenty years younger?"

"Of course you do."

"Then you must be blind. A stupid, foolish blind person." Even though the old man was cursing him, his tone of voice was cheerful. "Can't you tell that I actually look forty years younger?"

Zhuo Donglai smiled.

A white-clothed woman stood by his side. The old man grasped her two hands in his.

"It's all thanks to her service." The old man's eyes narrowed as he laughed. "Only a young pretty girl like this can make an old man become young again."

"It's also thanks to me," said Zhuo Donglai. "It's me that brought her here to you."

"But I'm not grateful at all to you." The old man winked again, his eyes flickering with a crafty naughtiness. "I know you're sucking up to me, that you want to pick more information out of my brain." When Zhuo Donglai didn't deny this, the old man said, "What do you want to pick out this time?"

“A person.”

“Who?”

“Xiao Leixue.”

**

The old man’s smile disappeared, and his bright eyes suddenly looked as dead as ash.

“Xiao Leixue, Xiao Leixue.” He repeated the name over and over. “He’s still alive? He’s not dead yet?”

“Not yet.”

The old man sighed. “Now I know what kind of person you are.” He stretched out a withered finger and pointed at Zhuo Donglai. “You’re an incredible bastard. Reckless, foolish and stupid, and so you want to provoke him.”

Zhuo Donglai wasn’t upset.

It seemed that no matter how the old man treated him, he wouldn’t get upset. That was because only this old man could tell him the things he wanted to know, but couldn’t figure out.

“I don’t want to provoke him,” said Zhuo Donglai. “I just want to know two things about him.”

“What two things?”

“His martial arts, and his weapon.”

The old man suddenly seemed to grow very nervous. A man of this age shouldn’t be nervous like this.

“Have you seen his weapon?” he asked.

“I haven’t.”

"Of course you haven't," said the old man, seeming to relax. "Only the spirits of the dead in hell have seen it."

"No one has seen his weapon?"

"Absolutely no one," said the old man. "Just like no one can ever see Tearstains."

"Tearstains?" asked Zhuo Donglai. "Whose tearstains?"

"Grandmaster Xiao's Tearstains."

"Who is Grandmaster Xiao?"

"Grandmaster Xiao is Xiao Leixue's father."

**

Zhuo Donglai always thought of himself as a very intelligent person, but now he was very confused.

He didn't understand anything the old man was saying. "Why can't anyone see the tearstains of his father?"

"Because when you see the tearstains, you will die under them."

Zhuo Donglai was even more confused. "Tearstains can kill people?"

The old man stared off into the distance, his eyes filled with sorrow and fear, as if he had suddenly seen something impossible to understand and impossible to control.

After a long time, he slowly stretched out his gaunt hands and gently picked up a zither which lay next to him.

The strings of the zither made a "zeng" sound.

The old man suddenly said, "Die Wu, please dance for me."

**

The fox-fur cloak slipped from her shoulders. The white-clothed woman's skin was just as white as her garments.

A silvery-white top garment, and a long silvery-white skirt. (3)

The long skirt floated like flowing water as she danced. It twisted like flurries of snow, revealing a pair of long, beautiful, flexible legs.

It was impossible to describe her dance, and impossible to describe her legs.

Even the man who comprehended the beauty of women more than anyone in the world, the Marquis Di Qinglin could only say, "I simply can't believe that anyone could have legs like this."

**

The rising and falling music of the zither suddenly became both luxuriant and depressing, and the dance of the dancer changed as well. Now it looked like the last leaf of autumn fluttering alone in the autumn wind, beautiful, desolate and heartbreaking.

The old man's eyes glistened with tears.

There was a "zheng" sound as one of the strings broke, and the zither music stopped. The dancer's skirt drifted about like clouds.

She curled up on the ground, looking like a dying swan slowly drifting down from the blue sky toward the emerald green sea.

And finally there was serene and harmonious silence. Silent and beautiful.

A teardrop rolled down the old man's old, withered face, leaving behind a tearstain.

One drop, two drops...

"Tearstains look like this," said the old man quietly. "Tearstains look like this!"

"Like what?"

“Unparalleled, flawless. There is no more powerful sword in the world of mortals!”

“Sword? Tearstains is a sword?”

“A sword,” said the old man. “A perfect sword, as perfect as Die Wu’s dance.”

“Why is the sword called Tearstains?”

“Because you can see tearstains on it. When it came out of the forge, tears fell onto the blade, leaving behind indelible tearstains.”

“Whose tearstains?”

“Grandmaster Xiao’s. The unparalleled Grandmaster Xiao.”

“When a treasured sword appears, both gods and ghosts will tremble in fear. This I understand,” said Zhuo Donglai. “What I don’t understand is why Grandmaster Xiao would shed tears for it.”

“Because in addition to being a master sword forger, he was also an unequalled sword diviner.” Sorrow filled the old man’s voice. “When the sword came out of the forge, he could see that an indispellable evil had touched it.”

“What evil?”

“The old man sighed. “As you just said, when a treasured sword appears, both gods and ghosts tremble in fear. When this sword came out of the forge, it carried with it the curses of gods and ghosts, all the viciousness in the world. When the sword is unsheathed, it must taste blood. Not only this, it required Grandmaster Xiao to make a sacrifice of his closest relative.”

“And Grandmaster Xiao’s closest relative is Xiao Leixue?”

“Correct,” said the old man sadly. “When the sword came out of the forge, Grandmaster Xiao could see that his only son would die beneath it.”

“Why didn’t he destroy the sword?”

“He couldn’t bear to, and didn’t dare to.”

“The sword was the product of his own painstaking effort, of course he couldn’t bear to destroy it.” This point, Zhuo Donglai could understand. “But I still don’t get why he wouldn’t dare to destroy it.”

“The will of heaven is fickle, the power of heaven hard to imagine. The underworld has many arrangements that people are powerless to resist.” The old man’s eyes filled with indescribable dread. “If Grandmaster Xiao destroyed it, it’s possible an even greater calamity would befall his only son.”

Zhuo Donglai’s eyes flickered. “So how did Grandmaster Xiao end up disposing of the sword?”

“Grandmaster Xiao had three disciples. His greatest disciple inherited his sword divining skills. He traveled to the remotest corners of the earth, practicing his art on the most powerful weapons.”

“I’ve heard of this person. In Jianghu, there is an old man, a blade-sharpener, who can determine whether a weapon is auspicious or inauspicious. His ability is god-like. He must be Grandmaster Xiao’s greatest disciple.”

The old man nodded. “Grandmaster Xiao’s second disciple Shao Kongzi inherited his sword making skill, and became a great swordsmith.”

“Shao Kongzi?” Zhuo Donglai was visibly moved. “He’s the Master Shao who forged the ‘Farewell Hook?’”

“Yes, that’s him,” said the old man. “These two were otherworldly geniuses. And yet Grandmaster Xiao passed down his greatest skill to his third disciple. He also gave him Tearstains.”

“Why did he give it to him?”

“Because he was not only benevolent and merciful of heart, he also innately lacked the desire for wealth and fame. He had no such ambitions, and would not take the lives of others.”

“He inherited Grandmaster Xiao’s sword skill, of course no one would be able to take Tearstains away from him,” said Zhuo Donglai. “And a benevolent elder such as him would surely not hurt his master’s only son.”

“Furthermore, at the age of thirty, he went into seclusion in the remote mountains. He swore an oath to never again step foot in the world of mortals, and to bury Tearstains with him when he died.”

“Which mountain was it?”

“I don’t know,” said the old man. “No one knows.”

Zhuo Donglai sighed. “And so because of this, Jianghu has one less great swordsman, one less weapon master. Is this Jianghu’s good fortune, or it’s misfortune?”

“Xiao Leixue is still alive.”

“Yes,” said Zhuo Donglai slowly. “In any case, he hasn’t died under Tearstains. At the least, he’s still alive.”

Though his voice seemed filled with sadness, his eyes shone with excitement, like a lecher who catches sight of a naked woman standing at the foot of his bed.

When he raised his head and looked at the old man sitting in the pavilion, it looked as if he had already fallen asleep.

**

The snow fell, thin but heavy. The little door was half opened. Zhuo Donglai had already stepped out, and Die Wu was preparing to shut the door.

Once it was shut, it was as if this place was completely cut off from the outside world.

She only wished that no one would ever come knock on the door ever again, that she and the old man could live out their life here. The outside world contained no hope for her, nothing to recall fondly.

Her heart was already dead; the only things that remained behind were a numb body and a pair of legs.

Her legs were like the tusks of an elephant, the fragrance of a musk deer, the horns of an antelope; they were the most precious part of her, and also the source of all her misfortune.

—If she didn't have these legs, what kind of person would she be? Would her life be just a little more happy?

**

Die Wu lowered her head and stood by the door, wishing Zhuo Donglai would leave.

Zhuo Donglai turned and looked at her with a very strange expression in his eyes. He stared at her for a long time.

"Has your life been well these days?"

"Very well."

Her voice was devoid of emotion, perhaps even more desolate than Zhuo Donglai's.

"You can stay here for as long as you wish. I can guarantee that no one will disturb you."

"Thank you."

"But, I can also have you sent somewhere else, too," he said coldly. "As long as I'm willing, I can send you anywhere. I know some people who wish very much for me to do that."

Die Wu suddenly took a step back, looking like a frightened antelope. She cowered in the corner behind the door.

Zhuo Donglai laughed.

"Of course I wouldn't do that." Ruthlessness filled his laughter. "I just want you to realize that you should treat me a little bit better, because of what you owe me."

Die Wu looked up and stared at him.

“How do you want me to treat you?” she asked. “You want me to sleep with you?” Her bearing suddenly became as elegant as a noble lady, although her words were those of a prostitute. “You must have heard that my skill is unmatched. If a man sleeps with me even one time, he’ll never be able to forget me for the rest of his life. You can’t imagine what it’s like once my legs are in motion. I’m afraid even in your dreams you couldn’t imagine it.” She was beginning to laugh crazily. “But I know you won’t take me, because the person you love isn’t me. You only love one person, and you live your entire life for him...”

She didn’t finish her sentence.

Zhuo Donglai suddenly grasped her wrist and struck her face with the back of his hand.

Five blood-red finger-marks appeared on her pale, beautiful face. But the fear in her eyes was gone, replaced by scorn and derision.

Zhuo Donglai twisted her wrist, twisted it until it was behind her back, until tears of pain seeped from her eyes. Then he slowly said, “You’re mistaken.” His eyes seemed to be filled with excitement at the sight of her pain. “I want you to understand that you are horribly mistaken.”

**

Deep night.

There was no lamp in the room, only the flickering fire in the oven. Die Wu lay twisted on the sable-fur-covered couch, completely naked. In the dancing firelight, her legs were beautiful, so beautiful that they would make people willing to travel to hell for her. Her tears had already stopped flowing.

Compared to the humiliation and pain she had just endured, the suffering she had experienced in her past was like a child’s game.

She simply could never have imagined that humanity contained this kind of perverted wild beast.

The door to the outer chamber was unlocked, and Zhuo Donglai had walked out. Die Wu could hear the voice of a young man from outside.

His voice was low, but Die Wu heard him tell Zhuo Donglai that Sima Chaoqun had suddenly taken ill. The illness was serious, and already several doctors had been called in to check on him. They said he was overworked, and must rest for a period of time to recover. Therefore he was not accepting visitors.

Zhuo Donglai was thought quietly for a long time before asking the young man, "He won't see visitors? Or he won't see anyone?"

"It seems he won't see anyone."

"Not even me?"

"It seems that way."

"So his wife specifically asked you to come tell me not to disturb him?"

"She only said, tell Mr. Zhuo to put everything on hold for a while and wait for the chief to recover."

"Did you see which doctors she called?"

"I saw three of them." The young man told him their names. They were all famous doctors from Chang'an.

"What did they say?" Zhuo Donglai asked. "That the chief's illness is serious? That if it continues on it could be extremely dangerous?" He thought for a long time and then sighed. "Now is not the time for him to fall ill. It's really unfortunate."

"Why?"

This young man was clearly one of Zhuo Donglai's most trusted aides, for him to dare ask such a question.

In the inner room, the muscles in Die Wu's body suddenly grew tense. Because she once again heard Zhuo Donglai's cruel voice. Very slowly, he said, "Because in the next day or two, Zhu Meng will be returning.

**

(1) The expression for massacre literally means that the streets were bathed with blood.

(2) Literally he uses the word “sir” or “mister” to refer to the man. But since English doesn’t usually use these as respectful ways to address people, especially when combined with “old,” I’m going to use the word “master” instead.

(3) These are obviously traditional style garments. I believe this is the type of outfit she is wearing: <http://goo.gl/rgjGmT>

CHAPTER 10 – THE SECOND MONTH IS TOO EARLY FOR SPRING IN LUOYANG

Part 1

The second month, the twenty-second.

Luoyang.

Morning.

A horse sped through the snow, charging into Luoyang. The rider wore a dark blue cloak, and a wide conical felt hat of Luoyang style. The brim of the hat hung low, covering half of the rider's face.

This person rode with great skill, but as soon as he entered the border of Luoyang, he dismounted. It seemed he didn't want anyone to see his face or skills.

And yet, this was his first time in Luoyang, and no one in the city had seen him before.

The same year, the same month, the same day.

Chang'an.

It was as bitterly cold in Chang'an as it was in Luoyang this early morning of the second month. Most people were still curled up in bed, but Zhuo Donglai was already up.

He was full of energy, but his face was very serious.

Sima Chaoqun had been sick for several days. His sickness had not improved, so naturally Zhuo Donglai's mood was not good.

He had not seen Sima at all. Every time he'd gone to visit, he'd been turned away by Wu Wan. The room room emanated the smell of medicines, and Wu Wan herself also looked thin and pale, but her stance was resolute. Other than herself and the doctors, no one was allowed in, not even Zhuo Donglai.

This was the first time she had ever treated Zhong Donglai rudely.

He didn't mind. What he told others was, "When a woman is caring for her husband's safety, anything she does can be forgiven."

Even though it was early morning, there were already two visitors waiting for Mr. Zhuo in the garden.

Two people. One, surnamed Jian, the other surnamed Shi. Both were famous doctors in Chang'an, with high positions and comfortable lives. For the most part, they never left their quilts and braziers in such cold weather.

But early this morning, Zhuo Donglai had sent people for them. They hadn't been led into the warm inner hall, but instead to this small, four-sided pavilion. There they waited, in the bitter cold.

Were it June, the pavilion would have been surrounded by lotuses and willows, filled with a gentle spring breeze. In those circumstances the two doctors would have been very happy.

But now, the cold wind cut through their bodies like a knife, and even though they wore heavy clothing and gloves, they were still turning blue from the cold. In their hearts, they wanted to give Zhuo Donglai a few doses of laxative medicine.

But no trace of such sentiment showed on their faces. Everyone in Chang'an knew which fate awaited anyone who offended Zhuo Donglai.

So when he arrived, wearing his violet marten coat, strolling down the small stone path, both men greeting him cheerfully, bowing deep with hands clasped.

Zhuo Donglai also treated them very courteously.

“The weather is so cold. Do you find it strange that I didn’t ask you inside where it’s warm, but instead invited you here?”

In their hearts they obviously thought it was very strange, but the words that came out were different.

“The snow makes everything so clear, and the plum blossoms are beautiful.” Doctor Shi had an ability with words. “The Master is a person with refined taste. Could it be that he invited us here to see the snow and the flowers?”

“Actually, I did invite you to here to see something, but it’s neither flowers nor snow.”

If it wasn’t flowers he wanted them to see, what was it?

“Madam Snow, who Doctor Shi keeps outside the city, has skin as white as snow,” said Zhuo Donglai with a smile. “And Miss Flower Petal, who Doctor Jian payed for just last night, is more beautiful than the flowers here. If I wanted the two gentlemen to enjoy the snow and flowers, there would be no need to invite them here.” (1)

The two famous doctors were sweating in their hearts. Their wives knew nothing about these matters, and yet Zhuo Donglai mentioned them casually.

In front of a person who could casually mention their deepest secrets, what could they dare say?

“Would the two gentlemen please come with me?”

Although Zhuo Donglai’s smile seemed to harbour ill intentions, Doctor Shi and Doctor Jian followed him obediently.

They walked to a gutter, built from white cut rocks, that bordered the stone path. One of Zhuo Donglai’s attendants lifted the slab cover off of the gutter. He turned to look at them. “Would the two gentlemen have a look. What is this?”

It was a gutter. Anyone could see that it was a gutter. Could it really be that Zhuo Donglai had called them out early in the morning to look at a gutter?

What about a gutter was worth looking at?

Doctor Shi and Doctor Jian were puzzled.

Zhuo Donglai stood there looking at the gutter, apparently absorbed, as if nothing in the world were more worthy of his attention.

Doctor Jian was somewhat short-tempered. Finally, he couldn't help but say, "It looks like it's just a gutter."

"Absolutely correct," said Zhuo Donglai coolly. "It looks like it's just a gutter, because it is only a gutter. What else could it look like?"

Doctor Shi and Doctor Jian said nothing.

"It's a very well-built gutter," Zhuo Donglai said causally. "It's smooth and level, never gets clogged. It flows straight from Mr. and Mrs. Sima's residence all the way to this flower garden, with nothing to impede it."

Even though the doctors were very familiar with medical texts, they had no idea what medicine was in Zhuo Donglai's proverbial medicine gourd.

And then there suddenly seemed to be the fragrance of medicine in the wind.

The stone path had already been swept clean earlier in the morning, including the gutter, which had no snow in it.

At the same time as they smelled the medicine, they saw some brownish sewage flowing down the gutter.

Zhuo Donglai waved his hand, and one of his attendants half-filled a small bowl with some of the sewage, and then carried it with both hands to the doctors.

"Would the two gentlemen please have a look? What is this?"

The two doctors didn't need to look. They already knew what it was. It wasn't sewage. Sewage wouldn't have medicine in it.

Zhuo Donglai stared at them coldly.

"I think the two gentlemen know what this is."

It seemed Doctor Jian wanted to speak. His lips quivered, but he said nothing.

Doctor Shi's lips were sealed as tight as if they had been sewn shut with thread.

"This is the medicine you two prepared for our chief two days ago. It's been simmering this entire time. From what I understand, this amount of medicine is worth about 50 pieces of silver."

The two doctor's faces twisted.

Zhuo Donglai continued, "This medicine should be sliding down Sima's throat. How could it be here in the gutter? I really don't understand." His eyes suddenly flashed. "Luckily there is someone who does understand."

"Who?" stuttered Doctor Shi. "Who understands?"

"You."

Doctor Shi looked as if he had been whipped. He could barely stand straight.

"If you don't understand, it must be because it's too hot here." Zhuo Donglai's tone suddenly became very soft again. "When someone is too hot, they can't remember things very well." He turned to his attendants. "Why don't you help the doctor out of his clothes."

Doctor Shi tightly clutched his fur coat. "There's no need," he said haltingly. "There's really no need. This coat is very comfortable."

Even with the fur coat he was freezing to death, without it he really would die from the cold.

Among the attendants were two large men who stepped forward to stand on either side of Doctor Shi.

"Are you sure you're not hot?" said Zhuo Donglai calmly.

Doctor Shi shook his head vigorously.

“So you must be able to remember. How could the medicine that should have been taken by the patient end up in the gutter? Is it because the patient isn’t really sick?”

“I don’t know.”

Zhuo Donglai laughed coldly. The two large men had already placed their enormous hands on Doctor Shi’s shoulders.

“I really don’t know. I didn’t even see him.”

Zhuo Donglais’ pupils suddenly shrank.

“You didn’t see him? You didn’t see Sima Chaoqun?”

“I didn’t. I really didn’t.”

“His wife called for you to see him, but you actually didn’t see him?”

“I didn’t even see his shadow,” said Doctor Shi nervously. “There was no trace at all of him in the room.”

Zhuo Donglai stood there quietly, looking at the cold, gray sky. He stood there for a long time, before slowly turning his head and staring at Doctor Jian. Very slowly, he said, “And you? Did you see him?”

“I didn’t see him either.” Doctor Jian seemed to be slightly more composed. “Hero Sima wasn’t in the room. Madam Sima asked us there just to see an empty room.”

And then they heard Wu Wan’s voice.

“If someone offers five hundred pieces of gold,” she said coldly. “There are many doctors who would be willing to look at an empty room. Next time, though, I’ll look for some who aren’t afraid of the cold.”

If there was someone here who really was sick, it would be Wu Wan.

Her face was yellow and sallow, her normally bright eyes bloodshot.

She stared at the two doctors. (2)

"I'm just a woman. I don't have the skills and abilities of Mr. Zhuo. And I won't make the two gentlemen shed their clothes." Her voice was as cold as ice. "But I suggest they check the door carefully before going to sleep. Otherwise they might wake in the middle of the night to find themselves sleeping outside in the snow."

The two doctor's faces turned green.

If looks really could kill, these two would already be dead in the snow.

"At this point, the two gentlemen should be able to get the out of here," said Wu Wan. "Please, get the hell out of here."

She was a gentle woman, mild and refined, who would always say "please" before making a request.

After the doctors had left, she said, "Mr. Zhuo, I very much want to ask you to do something."

"Do what?"

"Please get the hell out of here along with them."

There was no reaction from Zhuo Donglai, none at all. There was absolutely no expression on his face whatsoever.

"Sadly, I know you won't get the hell out of here," she sighed. "Your'e Sima Chaoqun's good friend, his brother. You could never find a better friend and brother if you looked everywhere under heaven."

Derision filled her voice, just as Die Wu's had been.

"And Sima Chaoqun made his name only by relying on you. He's just a simple-minded puppet. Without you, how could he be where he is today?" She laughed coldly. "At least, that's what you think, isn't it?"

Zhuo Donglai still showed no reaction. It was as if he was watching an actor sing on the stage.

"You're an extraordinary person, an extraordinary friend. You sacrifice everything for him, you live your whole life for him. You made him famous,

you made him the chief of the Great Protection Agency. You made him into the great hero of the masses.”

Wu Wan’s cold laughter was beginning to sound crazed.

“But do you know what the great hero’s life is like?” Her laughter was laced with venom. “He has a wife and sons and daughters. He has a family. But it’s like he’s not part of the family. There hasn’t been a day in his life that he’s lived for himself, because you arrange everything for him. Whatever you want him to do, he does, so much so that even if he wants to have a drink, he has to do it secretly.”

Zhuo Donglai suddenly interrupted her. “Enough,” he said. “You’ve said enough.”

“Yes, I’ve said enough,” she lowered her head. Tears covered her cheeks. “Is there something you want to say?”

“I only have one or two things to say.”

“I won’t let you treat me the way you treat other people.” Her voice seemed to be hard and soft at the same time. “Everyone in Jianghu knows that ‘Eastern Violet Clouds’ Zhuo Donglai has at least a hundred methods to shut people up.”

“It’s good that you understand that,” he said coldly. “Sima has left Chang’an, hasn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“Why did you hide the truth from me?”

“Because I want him to go do something that he wants to do. I’m his wife. I think every wife wants her husband to be independent, to be a real man.”

“When did he leave?”

“On the night of the seventeenth. He probably already reached Luoyang.”

“Luoyang?”

Zhuo Donglai's gray, wolf-like eyes were suddenly shot through with blood. "You sent him alone to Luoyang? Are you trying to get him killed?"

"We are husband and wife. Why would I want him to get killed?"

Zhuo Donglai stared at her. After a long time, he spoke, one word at a time. His voice was unique, sharper than a knife, and more venomous than a serpent. "Because of Guo Zhuang." (3)

Whenever Zhuo Donglai spoke in this way, it meant that someone in the world would fall victim to one of his injurious, fatal attacks.

"Because of Guo Zhuang."

Most people would not think much upon hearing his, but Wu Wan looked as if she had suddenly been stabbed by a poisonous scorpion, or had suddenly fell off the top of a tower. She could barely stand. Her yellow, pallid face suddenly with indescribable fear.

Of course Zhuo Donglai would not miss this opportunity to take advantage in change of state.

"The past few years, Sima sleeps separately from you," he said, his voice cruel and cold. "He hasn't even touched you. You're at the age where your sexual desire is at its peak, and suddenly you have a young, strong beautiful young man at your side, who knows how to please women. Sadly, he died at the Red Flower Bazaar, dead under Zhu Meng's blade, and his head ..." (4)

"Enough," said Wu Wan hoarsely. "You've said enough."

"I didn't want to talk about these things, because I didn't want to hurt Sima. "I'm only talking about it now so that you understand that you can conceal nothing from me. In the future you should be extremely careful and cautious in everything you do."

Wu Wan's body trembled.

"I understand now," she said, her eyes filled with hatred and venom. "You sent Guo Zhuang to Red Flower Bazaar so that he would be killed, because you already knew about me and him."

She threw herself toward him and grabbed his coat. "It's true isn't it? That's what happened?"

Zhuo Donglai looked at her coldly. He very gently used two fingers to tap her wrists.

Her arms slackened, and she fell to the ground. But she kept asking. "It's true, isn't it? Isn't it? That's what happened?"

She would never know if the matter had transpired in that way. Because Zhuo Donglai had left, and didn't look back, not even to glance at her. It was as if she were a bug that he had flicked off his coat, beneath his notice.
**

A long rope.

The long rope was in Wu Wan's hand. Wu Wan was beneath the crossbeam of the house. Wind blew in through the window. Cold, so cold.

"What day is it today? I think it's a good day." She talked to herself crazily, and slowly began tying the rope.

Tying it into a noose. (5)

Part 2

The same day, Luoyang.

This street had once bustled with noise and excitement, the sounds of food markets, teahouses, morning bazaars and flower markets.

But now there was nothing.

Just as if a strong and healthy person suddenly dropped dead, so too had this street died.

The doors of the teahouses had not been opened for days, and the only thing on the mottled butcher blocks in the food markets were faint knife marks. Not a single person could be seen on the street.

No one was willing to come here. Too many tragic calamities had occurred.

A stray dog, tail tucked between its legs, licked at the bloodstains left behind in the cracks between the stone slabs of the street.

The stray dog would never know whose blood it was.

The stray dog didn't know, but Oxhide knew.

Part 3

On another small street, in a small establishment called "Old Zhang's Mantou Shop," Oxhide was shooting off his mouth.

"Oxhide" was the nickname of a young man. Fond of the bottle, he not only could shoot off his mouth, the skin of his face was extremely thick. Thicker than oxhide. (6)

He was shooting off his mouth to a stranger from another part of China, because the stranger had already treated him to more than a few drinks.

He went on and on about the tragic events that day in Copper Camel alley.

"That kid was really a freaking good kid. I truly admire him from the bottom of my heart. He had freaking guts, and he was freaking fearless." (7)

The stranger listened quietly and poured him more wine.

"Later I heard that the kid's surname is Gao, and that he's the old lion's friend. Dragons befriend dragons, phoenixes befriend phoenixes, the friends of rats dig holes in the ground. This saying is really freaking true. Only a true man like the old lion could make that kind of a friend."

The stranger's eyes suddenly seemed to flash, but just as quickly he lowered his head. "You were there that day on the street?"

"How could I not be? How could I miss it?" Oxhide seemed very excited. "That day I wanted to go have a morning drink at Old Hu's teahouse, when I saw that kid swaggering down the street. It's the second month, but he only wore his short inner garment. His upper garment he carried in his hand. Later I realised that he had a sword hidden underneath."

Oxhide suddenly stood up and, gesturing with his chopsticks, said, "Just like this, he stabbed Boss Cai through the heart. It was so fast you couldn't even see clearly what happened." He shook his head and sighed. "No one thought that kid would be so gutsy, even I was shocked silly."

"And then what?"

"Everyone assumed that the kid was ready to be chopped to bits. No one imagined that at that critical moment, someone would fly down out of mid-air. It was just like ... just like the Flying General Li Guang descending from heaven." (8)

Hearing such fine words come out of his own mouth, Oxhide felt extremely pleased. So he downed another bowl of wine, and then asked the stranger, "Take a guess. Who do you think it was that dropped from the sky?"

"The old lion?"

Oxhide slapped his thigh. "Absolutely correct, it was him." The more he talked the more enthusiastic he became. "The old lion really is an old lion. His luck lately hasn't been very good, and he's lost some weight, but as soon as he appeared, he really looked exactly like a fierce lion."

Oxhide stuck out his chest and slapped it, and in his best imitation of Zhu Meng, said, "He's my friend. Anyone who wants to touch him has to kill me first."

"Don't tell me," asked the stranger calmly. "Boss Cai's brothers weren't willing to make a move."

"If anyone made a move, the old lion's lion spirit would erupt. Who would dare do anything?"

Oxhide suddenly sighed. "At first there really was no one willing to make a move. We never imagined that one of those out-of-town bastards would not know the difference between life and death, and suddenly attacked with him." (9)

"An out-of-towner?"

Oxhide nodded. "Later I found out that Boss Cai had actually hired all those bastards."

"But Boss Cai was already dead. If they cut down the old lion, no one would be able to pay them. Why would they be willing to risk their life for a dead man?"

"They definitely had a plan," said Oxhide, bursting with pride. "Even if you, my brother, can't figure it out, I know exactly what was going on."

"Oh?"

"You, my brother, don't know what kind of person the old lion is, but I do. And that bunch of bastards also knew."

"Knew what?"

"That the old lion wouldn't let them go."

"Why?"

"Those bastards are hired killers, and their hands reeked with blood. Plus, they weren't brothers of the Lion Clan. If the old lion once again regained control of the clan, how could he leave their heads on their necks?"

"Good point," admitted the stranger. "It makes sense."

"And if they really could cut down the old lion, who knows how much they could squeeze out of Boss Cai's underlings? So, they decided to fight."

Oxhide was extremely proud of himself for being able to clearly analyze such a complicated situation. So he drank another bowl. "This is called, 'he who strikes first gains the advantage, he who strikes next meets disaster.'"

“Who was it that met disaster?”

“At first it was difficult to tell. The battle shook the heavens and the earth. The spirits weeped and the gods shouted. Eight out of ten people on the street were so frightened they couldn’t even piss.”

A look of fear shone on Oxhide’s face, as if he had once again seen the heaps of blood and flesh flying in every direction, heard the sound of blades cleaving bones.

“I’m not a weakling, but after seeing that battle, I couldn’t even eat or sleep for two or three days.”

His voice hoarse, it seemed like he didn’t want to say anything more. But the stranger poured him another bowl of wine.

This bowl brightened his spirits immediately.

“At first, the old lion and the Gao kid had the upper hand, but then things changed.”

“Why?”

“The saying is true, ‘two fists can’t resist four hands, a true man can’t stand up against a crowd.’ Even though the old lion was as awe-inspiring as ever, they were only two people. Even if people stuck out their necks to be chopped, their hands would get tired sooner or later. Seeing this situation, some of the brothers of the Lion Clan who at first were shocked by his power, suddenly wanted to make a move, take the opportunity to knock down the sick old lion.”

The stranger nodded.

He had been thinking the same thing, that the situation would inevitably end up that way. “As soon as those people made their move, the old lion and the Gao kid would definitely be chopped into mincemeat.”

Oxhide sighed. “At that time, I was hoping that they would get out of there. It’s not that they didn’t have the opportunity to flee. If it had been me, I know exactly where I would have fled to.”

“The old lion didn’t flee?”

“Of course he didn’t.” Oxhide stuck out his chest again. “The old lion isn’t a nobody like me. Because of his status and temperament, he wouldn’t flee even if you killed him.”

“So he didn’t flee.”

“He didn’t.”

“But I know he didn’t die.”

“Of course he didn’t die. How could the old lion die?” Oxhide sighed. “But Cleats died.”

“Cleats?” said the stranger. “Who is Cleats?”

“A true man. An amazing man.” Oxhide’s face was red with excitement. “In my whole life, I’ve never seen a better man than him. If he hadn’t died, I would be willing to wash his feet every day. Not only do I admire him, anyone who is a person couldn’t not admire him.”

“Why?” asked the stranger.

“Originally he was just one of the old lion’s footmen. He always seemed to be just like a little kid, always getting bullied by others.” Oxhide’s face was flushed. “But now I know, the people who acted like heroes in front of him before, are really just sons of bitches.(10) He is the real hero and true man.”

At this point it seemed Oxhide’s blood was boiling. He ripped open his tattered padded cotton jacket and shouted, “That day I saw clearly, his body was slashed nineteen times by blades, and his nose was half cut off. The remaining half of his nose hung from his face swinging back and forth as he moved.”

“What did he do?”

“He ripped off his nose, skin and all, and swallowed it. Then he swung his sword and chopped down another person.”

When he heard this, the stranger, who up to now had seemed indifferent, couldn't help but drink a bowl of wine and shout, "A true man. Really a true man."

Oxhide slapped the table. "It's sad that a true man like this would die in the battle. He didn't fall down until both of his arms and one of his legs had been chopped off. And even when he fell down, he still bit a chunk of flesh off of another person."

"Then what happened?"

"Seeing such a heroic and miserable death, we all couldn't help but weep. Even the Lion Clan brothers who had wanted to stage a revolt were shedding tears because they were so moved." Oxhide continued, "The old lion shed no tears, he only shed blood. His eyes had been cut, and blood flowed down his face just like tears. Even though he was almost to the point where he couldn't continue any more, he summoned his final burst of power to cut a path to Cleats side. Then he picked up his faithful companion." (11)

He blew his nose and wiped the tear stains from his face. Tears filling his eyes, he said, "Cleats wasn't dead yet, and he only had one breath left."

Blood flowed down the long street, and Little Gao continued to battle on.

Zhu Meng lifted Cleats into his arms, wanting to speak, but unable to. Blood poured from his eyes onto Cleat's face.

Cleats suddenly opened his blood-stained eyes, and uttered his final words.

"Reporting to Clan Leader. Your humble servant is not able to look after the Clan Leader any more. Your humble servant has to die now."

The cold wind blew unceasingly, causing sheets of snow to fall from the eaves outside of the mantou shop. Tears dripped down Oxhide's face.

The stranger shed no tears, and didn't speak. But his hands were clenched into fists, as if he were fighting to control himself, afraid tears would fall from his eyes.

After a long time, Oxhide spoke again. "After Cleats said this, he stopped breathing. And then, the whole street was filled with a mighty, thunder-like roar. Not only could the brothers of the Lion Clan not repress it, I myself couldn't repress it. Everyone charged," he said, loudly, "and chopped those murderous bastards down. Even I killed a few."

Suddenly, the stranger slammed his palm down onto the table. "Good. A good kill." He downed another bowl of wine. "I, Sima Chaoqun, drink a cup to you."

A crashing sound rang out as Oxhide's bowl of wine fell to the ground and shattered.

"What?" he said, looking at the stranger, shocked. "What what did you say?"

"I said that I drink to you."

"Who are you? Who is it that's drinking to me?"

"It's just me, Sima Chaoqun."

"You're Sima Chaoqun?"

"Yes, I am."

Oxhide's body suddenly became weak and it looked like he might collapse to the ground. Stuttering, he said, "Your humble servant didn't know that you were the greatest true man under heaven, Master Sima. Your humble servant doesn't dare let you drink to me."

"I want to drink to you, and I must. Because you are also a courageous and upright man. In fact, drinking one cup is not enough. I must drink a whole jug to you."

Then he actually picked up the jug with both hands, tilted his neck back and drank it down. Then he looked up to the heavens and sighed. "All Jianghu friends under heaven say that I am a true man and hero unequalled in our time, but how can I compare to Cleats? How can I compare to Zhu Meng?"

The wind outside blew more and more urgently.

Even though it was already the second month, it seemed that Spring was very far away from Luoyang.

**

(1) Miss Flower Petal's Chinese name literally means "stamen" or "pistil" of a flower, but neither of those sound very pleasing to the ear in English so I'm tweaking it a bit. And when it says he "payed" for her, it implies that he is supporting her long-term.

(2) It literally calls them "cold-fearing" doctors

(3) This Guo Zhuang is apparently different from the Guo Zhuang who Zhuo Donglai sent to Luoyang. The "Zhuang" character is different. Also, the character who died while attacking Zhu Meng was Sun Ping, and Zhu Meng specifically mentioned that he expected Zhuo Donglai to send Sun Ping instead of Guo Zhuang. So regarding the true circumstances of Guo Zhuang's death, I think perhaps we are supposed to be left wondering.

(4) Regarding his comments on her sexual desire, what he actually says is "You've reached the 'wolf and tiger years.'" This is based on a phrase in Chinese that is something like 'thirty years a wolf, forty years a tiger.' It means that women are at the peak of sexual desire between the ages of 30-40.

(5) The actual Chinese says "she was tying a knot, a knot of death."

(6) There is some play on words going on here. First of all, the word oxhide or cowskin can in and of itself have the meaning of bragging to boasting. Furthermore, what I'm translating as shooting off his mouth is 吹牛 or "to blow the cow." It means to boast, brag, shoot off your mouth.

(7) He is using some common dialect words that make his speech sound relatively uneducated.

(8) Flying General Li Gang is a real person: <http://goo.gl/NvWaCl>

(9) This is a twist on an expression which means "to break the ground where a god presides." Except he replaces "a god" with "the old lion."

(10) As usual, I'm translating the cussing into colloquial English. The original Chinese curse is "grandsons of turtles."

(11) Here it likens Cleats to a dog, in a good way. It calls him his "his friend who follows him around like a dog." It's supposed to invoke the feeling of a loyal dog who follows his master to death. But in English it sounds a bit derogatory, so I'm going to leave out the dog reference.

CHAPTER 11 – EIGHTY-EIGHT JIAN

Part 1

The second month, the twenty-third.

Chang'an.

Before dawn.

The sky was a dead gray color, as was the ground. The magnificently constructed ancient city of Chang'an had not opened its gates yet.

Old Huang and Ah Jin, who were responsible for opening the gates every day, had slaughtered a pig last night, and pooled their money to buy a big bottle of baijiu and a heap of flatbreads. Having drunk and eaten to their hearts content, they could barely crawl out of bed in the morning.

Dereliction of guard duty and failure to promptly open the city gates, were both punishable by "Immediate Decapitation." (1)

Military Law remained as immovable as a mountain. So when Old Huang got up and realized that he was already thirty minutes late, he began sweating in fear. Before he had even finished buttoning his padded coat, he was outside opening the city gates.

"The weather is so cold, there probably won't be anyone waiting to get into the city."

He comforted himself as he fiddled with the great lock of the main gate. He opened the gates a crack and nearly died from fright.

Outside were seventy or eighty people, all dressed sharply, all the way down to their layered leg-wrappings. They wore ghost-head swords strapped to their backs, and their heads were wrapped with white cloths, on top of which were sewn strips of mottled reddish fabric.(2) Each

person wore an expression that matched the day's weather, and emanated murderous auras which would cause anyone to have goosebumps.

As soon as the gates opened, the people separated into two groups and quietly entered the city, the blood-red tassels on their swords fluttering in the wind, the white cloths wrapping their heads shining, the edges of their blades glittering.

Their blades were not sheathed, because they didn't carry sheaths.

—Who were these ferocious men? Why had they come to Chang'an?

Old Huang the city guard stood in his position. Initially he planned to question them, but now his tongue had grown stiff and he couldn't even speak.

This was because at that moment a man walked to the front. He dressed in a bear-fur garment, and he stared at Old Huang with a pair of bloodshot eyes. Even though he seemed somewhat emaciated, his cheekbones protruded proudly, and his eyes were as sharp as a blade. He had an awe-inspiring presence, like a wild beast that had just emerged from the deep mountains.

White cloth, sewn with a patch of mottled reddish fabric, held back his unruly hair.

The only person dressed differently was a thin, handsome young man who carried a long, narrow bundle, wrapped in black cloth, gripped tightly against his body.

Old Huang grew weak at the knees. Anyone who saw such a murderous group would certainly feel consternation.

"Do you want to question us? Where are we from? What are we doing here?"

The man's voice, though hoarse, carried a majestic and spirited air.

"Listen, and listen well. I am Zhu Meng. Zhu Meng of Luoyang." In a stern voice he continued, "We have come to Chang'an to die."

Part 2

Zhuo Donglai's face showed no emotion, and even now looked as if it had been frozen, every single muscle. If you have ever seen a dead person frozen in ice, perhaps you can imagine the expression on his face.

A young man, not yet twenty, stood in front of him, as straight as a javelin. The expression on the young man's face was almost the same as Zhuo Donglai's.

This young man's name was Zhuo Qing

He wasn't always surnamed Zhuo. He used to be surnamed Guo. He was the brother of Guo Zhuang, who died in the Red Flower Bazaar.

But after having been adopted by Zhuo Donglai, he forgot about his old name.

"Zhu Meng has entered the city."

He had reported this news, and he had also been the one to discover the medicine flowing down the gutter.

Recently, the tasks he had accomplished for Zhuo Donglai far exceeded those of any of his other trusted subordinates.

"How many men came?"

"Including Gao Jianfei, there are a total of eighty-eight.

"Did he specifically tell Guard Huang that he was Zhu Meng?"

"Yes."

"What else did he say?"

"That they had come to Chang'an to die!"

Zhuo Donglai's pupils constricted, as if they had become awls.

"They didn't come to Chang'an to kill someone? They came to Chang'an to die?"

“Yes.”

“Good. Very good.” The corners of his eyes began to pulse. “Extremely good.”

People who knew Zhuo Donglai knew that only when circumstances were extremely critical would the corners of his eyes pulse in this way.

They pulsed because he knew that his opponent had not brought eighty-eight men, but rather, eight hundred and eighty.

—People with murderous intent are not to be feared, but people prepared to die are. They are worth as much as ten.

“Tell me again what they wore.”

“They dressed well, and had leggings. They wore white bands, and sewn onto each band was a torn strip of reddish cloth.”

Zhuo Donglai laughed coldly.

“Good. Extremely good. Do you know where those pieces of cloth came from?”

“I don’t.”

“They are definitely Cleats’ bloodstained clothes. When he died, his clothes were most certainly died red with blood.”

People from Luoyang had already returned and reported to Zhuo Donglai all the details of the bloody battle.

“The Lion Clan was like a sheet of shifting sand, unable to unite. But Cleats’ blood brought them together again.” Zhuo Donglai’s voice suddenly seemed to contain some emotion. “Cleats. Very good. What a good kid.”

“Yes,” said Zhuo Qing. “Cleats might not look very good, but they are cheap. They usually aren’t as good as other types of shoes, but when it’s raining or snowing, or the road is muddy and slippery, they are most useful.”

He spoke in a very flat tone, because he was simply describing a fact.

He was not the type of person to be easily moved by emotion.

Zhuo Donglai stared at him, stared for a very long time, and then did something that no one would ever have expected him to do.

He suddenly stood up, walked over, and embraced Zhuo Qing. Even though it was a very light embrace, it was the first time in his life he had ever done something like this.

—Other than Sima Chaoqun, it was his first time to get close to any other man.

Even though Zhuo Qing still just stood there like a javelin, hot tears filled his eyes.

It seemed Zhuo Donglai had not expected this reaction. He suddenly changed the topic. “Zhu Meng knows where I am, but he hasn’t come looking for me yet.”

“Correct.”

“Considering that they came here to die, I really must accommodate them. I must go looking for him.”

“Yes.”

“But these eighty-eight men have embraced death in their hearts. Eighty-eight men of one mind, one spirit. They are suppressing this spirit of death, but it may break out at any moment, it won’t be easy to hold back.”

“Correct.”

“So I won’t go after them right now.”

“Yes.”

Zhuo Donglai’s awl-like pupils suddenly filled with a ruthless and uncanny smiling air. “Do you know how I will deal with them?” he asked Zhuo Qing.

“I don’t.”

One word at a time, Zhuo Donglai spoke, in his unique tone. "I'm going to treat them to a meal. I want to have a welcoming banquet for them tonight at 'Chang'an' Restaurant."

"Ok."

"You must go invite them for me."

"Very well."

"Zhu Meng might not accept. He might think it's a trap. But," he said coldly, "I'm sure you can think of a way to convince them to go."

"Yes," said Zhuo Qing, "they will go. They definitely will go."

"And I hope you can come back alive."

Zhuo Qing's reply was simple and resolute: "I will."

Part 3

Upon returning to his room, Zhuo Donglai found Die Wu combing her hair.

She ran the comb through her long, pitch-black hair, over and over again. It seemed as if there were nothing in the world she wanted other than to comb her hair.

Zhuo Donglai watched her quietly, watched her run the comb through her hair again and again.

Two people, one comb, one person watching. A long time passed and then suddenly a snapping sound rang out as the comb broke into three pieces.

This comb was a high quality product of the "Jade Square" in Liuzhou. Even if you tried to twist it with two hands, it would be difficult to break it.

Women usually treasure their hair, and would never use force when combing it.

But the comb had indeed broken.

Die Wu's hands began to tremble. They trembled so much so that she couldn't even hold the remaining piece of the comb in her hand. It clattered to the dressing table.

Zhuo Donglai didn't see.

It seemed as if he didn't see any of these things.

"I'm treating some people to dinner tonight," he told her softly. "Two honoured guests."

Die Wu looked at the broken pieces of the comb on the dressing table, looking as if she were beginning to go crazy.

She laughed crazily, and then said, "Every day I have to treat myself, because everyone has to eat, even someone like me. Eat a bowl, then eat another bowl, I eat so happily."

"I want my guests to eat happily today, too," said Zhuo Donglai. "So I want you to do something for them."

"Whatever you want me to do is fine." She laughed unceasingly. "Even if you want me to go and eat shit, I'll comply with your wishes."

"Well that's excellent, then." Zhuo Donglai was also laughing, and his laughter seemed to be filled with joy. "Actually, you should know what I want you to do for them." Oh so slowly, he said, "I want you to dance for them."

"The treasured sword is ruthless, Zhuangzi dreams no dreams;
Dance for the king, transform into a butterfly." (3)

Part 4

The most famous eatery in Chang'an was called "Chang'an Restaurant." The most famous teahouse in Chang'an was also called "Chang'an Restaurant."

But Chang'an Restaurant and Eatery and Chang'an Restaurant and Teahouse were completely different.

"Chang'an Restaurant, definitely not easy."

To start such an eatery or teahouse like these was definitely not very easy.

Chang'an Restaurant Eatery was in the west of the city. Its gardens and parks were spacious, the cutlery elegant. Amidst the luxuriant flowers and trees were ten pavilions, each floor of each pavilion decorated resplendantly. The quality of the food was the highest, garnering ceaseless praise.

Chang'an Restaurant Teahouse was in the city center, on one of the most flourishing and bustling streets. Prices were reasonable and business was good. And whether one was drank tea or alcohol, or ate food, the portion sizes were good, and would definitely not leave anyone feeling like they had been taken advantage of.

So early every morning, customers from every walk of life would fill the establishment. (4)

That was because in addition to food and drink, you could enjoy many other forms of entertainment there. You could see bizarre people and run into old friends. Maybe the woman sitting at the table next to you, drinking tea with her husband and child, would be your lover from years before. Perhaps sitting in the corner, unwilling to raise his head, was the debtor you had been searching for for so long.

If you didn't want to be found, this was not the place to go to.

And so Zhu Meng went there.

He wasn't scared of being found; in fact he was waiting for someone from the Great Protection Agency to come looking for him.

No one was willing to ask him, "Why did you come here. Why don't you just kill your way into the Great Protection Agency?"

Zhu Meng had his reasons.

—Chang'an was the Great Protection Agency's base of operations, and was filled with experts. Even more fearsome were Sima Chaoqun's and Zhuo Donglai's martial arts. So of course they waited patiently for their enemy to arrive, having planted themselves in a favorable position.

"We're here to defy death, not deliver ourselves to it. We may have to die, but we don't have to die a meaningless death."

—When fighting a formidable opponent, relying only on courage was not enough.

"We must be patient, rely on ourselves, endure any humiliation to accomplish our mission."

—Die Wu, will you really dance for others?

Zhu Meng tried as hard as possible not to think of her.

Even though Die Wu's movements when dancing could etch themselves indelibly into one's memory, they had already been diluted by Cleat's red blood.

He had sworn an oath, not to let Cleat's blood be shed in vain.

No one drank.

Their emotions aroused, their fighting spirit ignited, there was no need to rely on alcohol to provide stimulation.

The teahouse had over a hundred tables, and they had occupied thirteen of them. Earlier, the teahouse had been packed, but as soon as they appeared, more than half of the customers had fled.

After seeing the blood red tassels on their blades, the white cloths on their heads, the murderous expression on their faces, everyone could tell that these strangers were not here to drink tea.

They were here to drink blood.

The blood of their enemies.

Zhuo Qing arrived alone.

When he entered the teahouse, they didn't notice him, because they had no idea who he was.

Only Little Gao knew.

This young man had left a deep impression on Little Gao, but it seemed Zhuo Qing didn't recognise him. He entered the teahouse and walked directly up to Zhu Meng.

"Are you the Clan Leader of the Lion Clan from Luoyang?"

Zhu Meng suddenly lifted his head and stared at him with two bloodshot eyes. "Yes, I am Zhu Meng. Who are you?"

"Your young servant is surnamed Zhuo." (5)

"You're surnamed Zhuo?" asked Little Gao, shocked. "I seem to remember you weren't surnamed Zhuo before."

"Oh?"

"You used to be surnamed Guo. I remember very clearly."

"I don't remember," said Zhuo Qing coolly. "I've forget the past very quickly. Things that should be forgotten, I won't think about."

He looked at Little Gao calmly, his face completely expressionless. "It wouldn't hurt for you to learn from me a bit. Maybe your life would be a bit happier."

—It is often at the most inappropriate time that people will recall things they shouldn't recall. This is one of the greatest agonies.

—Was Little Gao now thinking about that woman?

He suddenly wanted to have a drink.

Just as these thoughts entered his head, Zhu Meng laughed. He turned his head up and laughed wildly. "Well said!" In a loud voice he ordered, "Bring

wine! I want to drink three large bowls of wine with this well-spoken young man."

"Your young servant doesn't want to drink right now," said Zhuo Qing. "I can't accompany you."

Zhu Meng's laughter suddenly ceased, and he stared at him with a predatory look. "You don't want to drink and you don't want to accompany me?"

"Correct, I don't want to drink. Not even one drop." Zhuo Qing didn't even blink. "When your young servant wants to forget something, he doesn't need to drink alcohol."

Zhu Meng shot to his feet. The teapot in his hand shattered. "You really won't drink?"

Zhuo Qing's expression hadn't changed. "If the Clan Lord wishes to kill me now, it would be as easy as turning over his hand. But to get me to drink would be as difficult as climbing to the heavens."

Zhu Meng suddenly laughed heartily. "You're a good kid. You have guts. You're surnamed Zhuo, is it the same Zhuo as Zhuo Donglai?"

"Yes."

"And Zhuo Donglai sent you here?"

"Yes."

"To do what?"

"Your young servant was sent here to extend an invitation to the Clan Leader and Hero Gao. Tonight Mr. Zhuo would like to hold a welcoming banquet for you, at the First Pavilion of Chang'an Restaurant, in the west of city."

"Does he know how many people we brought here?"

"Not counting Hero Gao, the Clan Leader has brought eighty-six people."

“And he only wants to invite us two?” Zhu Meng laughed coldly. “Zhuo Donglai is really just too stingy.”

“I’m afraid he’s not stingy, but considerate.”

“Considerate?”

“Because Mr. Zhuo wants to be considerate, he only dares to invite the Clan Leader and Hero Gao.”

“Why?”

“Even if it’s a hazardous situation, two unparalleled heroes can come and go as they wish.” (6) Zhuo Qing laughed coolly. “I’m afraid others just won’t do.”

Zhu Meng laughed again. “Well said. Even if the Chang’an Restaurant First Pavilion is a hazardous situation, Zhu Meng and Little Gao will head over. But you shouldn’t have come here.”

“Why?”

“When a talented person like you suddenly appears, how could I bear to let him go?” Zhu Meng’s laughter was as cold as snow. “If I let you go, wouldn’t everyone under heaven laugh at me, and say that Zhu Meng could not see a hero standing right in front of him?”

Zhuo Qing suddenly laughed.

“If Yang Jian could seek refuge with the Great Protection Agency, then I could also seek refuge with the Lion Clan. But I’m afraid now it’s not possible.”

“And when would it be possible?”

“When the Lion Clan is powerful enough to defeat the Great Protection Agency.” Zhuo Qing appeared to be completely emotionless. “Your young servant is not a very loyal person, but he does have a very clear view of things.”

Little Gao looked at him, shocked. He really had never imagined that he would hear such words come from the mouth of someone so young.

Zhuo Qing noticed his change of expression. “What I’m saying is the truth,” he said. “The truth is often not very pleasant to hear.”

Zhu Meng laughed. “Then should I let you return to Zhuo Donglai so that you can help him fight us?”

“Your young servant already said, the Clan Leader can kill me by simply turning over his hand. But the Clan Leader should realize that if he does kill me, then seeing a certain person again would be as difficult as climbing to the heavens.”

Zhu Meng’s face changed color.

He knew which “certain person” Zhuo Qing was talking about. The statement slashed at him like a whip, and he suddenly didn’t know how to protect himself.

Zhuo Qing had already bowed and saluted. “Your young servant takes leave.”

He suddenly turned and walked off, clearly not worried at all that someone might cleave his head off from behind. He didn’t cast another glance at Zhu Meng.

The veins on Zhu Meng’s forehead bulged.

—He couldn’t let Zhuo Qing leave, couldn’t let his subordinates see him let an enemy free because of a woman.

—But how could he let Die Wu die?

Little Gao sighed. “I never thought he would see things so clearly. He knew that the Lion Clan’s Zhu Meng wouldn’t kill an unarmed person, someone acting on orders to extend an invitation.” He glanced around. “No true man would do something like that, let alone Zhu Meng.”

One of the other men stood up and said in a loud voice, “Big Brother Gao is right. Brothers, let’s all toast Big Brother Gao.”

Eighty six men all shouted in agreement, their voices ringing like thunder. Little Gao ripped open his jacket. “Okay! Bring the wine!”

Part 5

"I know Zhu Meng can't let go of Die Wu," said Zhuo Donglai coldly. "But I didn't think he would let you go so easily." A deeply meaningful expression filled his eyes. "To let an enemy go so easily, and all for a woman. Isn't Zhu Meng worried his brothers will look down on him? Isn't he worried about weakening their spirit?" He laughed coldly. "Is Die Wu really that entrancing?"

"Their morale is no lower," said Zhuo Qing.

"Because Gao Jianfei understands Zhu Meng's moods, and was able to get him out of his predicament. He led Zhu Meng's brothers to believe that he released his enemy, not because of a woman, but because of the code of brotherhood."

"When two countries are at war, you don't kill the ambassadors. Zhu Meng is straightforward and upright, how could he kill an unarmed man?" Zhuo Qing's eyes shone with admiration. "That's what Gao Jianfei said."

Zhuo Donglai continued laughing. "This guy really is a true friend to Zhu Meng. The rest of his brothers are all just pigs."

"Actually, they understood what Gao Jianfei was doing," said Zhuo Qing. "But they weren't willing to scorn Zhu Meng. Because they don't want Zhu Meng to be that cold-blooded. Because true heroes aren't ruthless."

"And what kind of person can be ruthless?"

"An ambitious person," said Zhuo Qing. "Heroes shed no tears, ambitious people are ruthless." (7)

Zhuo Donglai's shone with violent coldness. He stared at Zhuo Qing for a long time, before coldly asking him, "If Gao Jianfei didn't say what he said, would Zhu Meng have killed you?"

"He still wouldn't have."

"Why not?"

Zhuo Qing's voice was cool and calm. "Because in his heart, Die Wu's life is more valuable than mine."

Part 6

Dusk. After dusk.

The room was dark, and the lamps had not been lit. Die Wu didn't like lamps.

—Was it because she feared that she would be drawn to the flames like a moth?

Flames flickered in the oven. Die Wu stood beside it, slowly removing her clothes.

Her naked body sparkled, smooth, pure white and flawless.

The door pushed open. She knew someone had entered the room, but she didn't turn her head. Other than Zhuo Donglai, no one would dare enter his room.

She bent over and began to gently massage her legs.

She knew that the suppleness of her legs could easily arouse the lust of men.

No one could resist this kind of enticement, no one ever had.

So she found it strange.

Zhuo Donglai looked at her, but didn't make any move whatsoever.

She slipped into her dancing outfit, which was as delicate as a cicada's wings. When she wore it, it seemed as if she were adorned with moonlight, hazy moonlight, beautiful in a way that made her irresistibly enticing.

And yet Zhuo Donglai continued to stand there, motionless.

Die Wu finally couldn't help but turn around. The pearl head ornament in her hand fell to the ground.

The person who had entered was not Zhuo Donglai.

As she turned her head, she saw a young man standing in front of her, looking at her, his face pale and lifeless.

Die Wu quickly recovered her composure.

She had never imagined someone other than Zhuo Donglai would dare enter his room, but she accepted his presence.

The only thing that she found strange now, was that the young man looked at her in a way no one had ever looked at her before.

When others looked at her naked body and long legs, their eyes would burn as if with fire.

But this young man's eyes were as cold and sharp as an icy crag.

Zhuo Qing looked at Die Wu, and it seemed as if he was looking at a chunk of ice, or a block of stone, or the edge of a knife.

Die Wu looked at him too, for a long time. She could sense no change in his expression.

"Who are you?" she finally asked. "Can you tell me who you are?"

"Zhuo Qing. My name is Zhuo Qing."

"Are you a person? A flesh and blood person?"

"I am."

"Are you blind?"

"No."

"Can't you see me?"

"I can," said Zhuo Qing. "I can see every part of your body, very clearly."

His voice, cold and polite, contained no trace of derision or obscenity.

He was simply stating the facts.

Die Wu laughed and then sighed, a laughing sigh. "Don't tell me you always tell the truth?"

"Sometimes I do, sometimes I don't. When there's no need to lie, I tell the truth."

"And now, you don't need to lie?"

"Absolutely not."

Die Wu let out another sigh. "You say you can see every part of my body clearly. Aren't you worried Zhuo will dig your eyes out?"

Zhuo Qing looked at her calmly for a long time, then one word at a time said, "He won't do that."

Die Wu seemed to have no reaction to this, but she completely understood his meaning.

"He won't do that," she said. "Because he's given me to you? He's not given me to you? He's given me to someone else?"

Zhuo Qing said nothing.

"He's really so magnanimous," said Die Wu, her voice filled with scorn. "Never before has a man who slept with me been willing to let me go." She sighed. "It's really a pity."

"A pity?"

"A pity for you. He really should give me to you. You'll never meet another woman like me in your entire life."

"Oh?"

“It’s a pity for me. You’re young, you’re good looking. I’ve always liked big boys like you. You never get tired.”

She gazed at him, her eyes narrowing, her lips moist. She walked toward him, slowly opening her garment, and pressing her lithe, sleek, warm body up against his.

Her waist undulated, and a moan rose from deep in her throat.

Zhuo Qing had no reaction.

Die Wu panted, reaching out to grasp his hand. Suddenly, her hand was grabbed firmly, and she was thrown away.

Zhuo Qing tossed her like a ball onto the bed, and looked at her coolly. “There are plenty of methods you can use if you want to torture yourself, to humiliate yourself. You can use any method you want. But I won’t.”

“You won’t?” laughed Die Wu. Her laughter was filled with madness. “Aren’t you a man?”

“Trying to make me angry won’t work,” he said. “I’m not going to sleep with you.”

“Why not?”

“Because I am a man. I don’t want to be tormented every day by thinking about your body.”

“As long as you’re willing, you can hold me every night.”

Zhuo Qing smiled, a smile that seemed as if it had been carved from granite. “I thought of that too. But I also know the fate of men who want to hold you.”

Die Wu stopped laughing, and her eyes filled with an indescribable look of torment.

“You’re right,” she said softly. “The men who want to hold me are either dead or suffering.” Her voice was hoarse and filled with pain. “Thankfully,

those men are not bastards, just idiots. Any suffering they experience is their own doing.”

“And Zhu Meng,” asked Zhuo Qing. “Is Zhu Meng a bastard or an idiot?”

Die Wu stood up and stared at the flickering flames in the oven. A long time passed, and then she laughed coldly. “You think Zhu Meng misses me? You think Zhu Meng will feel sad and broken-hearted over me?”

“He won’t?”

“He isn’t a person,” she said, her voice filled with hatred. “The same as Zhuo Donglai.”

“Are you telling me he doesn’t care about you?”

“What does he care about? He only cares about his reputation, his position, his power. If I died in front of his face, he wouldn’t shed a single tear.”

“Really?”

“In his eyes, I’m not a person, I’m just a toy, just like a child’s doll. When he’s happy, he’ll bring out the doll to play, but when he’s bored he throws it to the side. Sometimes he wouldn’t even talk to me for days.”

“So because he treats you like this, you decided to sneak away after our surprise attack on the Lion Clan?”

“I’m a person too. Would any person be willing to be treated like a toy?”

“No. But,” said Zhuo Qing, “did you ever stop to think that maybe you misjudged him?”

“What did I misjudge about him?”

“Sometimes men like him are not able to show the true feelings in their heart. I know that there are many people who cannot show their feelings, especially toward the woman they love.”

“Why?”

“Perhaps because they think that expressing love to a woman would mean that they aren’t a true man, a manly man. Or maybe it because they really don’t know how to do it in the first place.”

“Zhu Meng is not like that,” she said sharply. “He understands these things better than anyone, and can do them better than anyone.”

“Oh?”

“When he treats others well, what he does is more beautiful than anyone else could do. Sometimes it makes me sick.”

“But you aren’t other people. You’re different from others.”

“How am I different?”

“Because you are his woman. Maybe he thinks you should innately know how you are different from others.”

“Well, I don’t know,” she said. “If a man truly loves a woman, he should make her know.”

“Maybe you don’t understand him.”

“I don’t understand him?!” Die Wu let out another cold laugh. “I slept with him for three or four years, and I don’t understand him?”

Zhuo Qing’s face was filled with another granite-like smile. “Of course you understand him, much more than we do.”

The night was dark, and the room had long since grown silent. Die Wu sighed lightly.

“I’ve said too much tonight, haven’t I.”

“Yes,” said Zhuo Qing. “We should go now. I came here to take you away.”

“Where are you taking me?”

One word at a time, Zhuo Qing said, “Don’t tell me you forgot? You promised Mr. Zhuo that you would dance for him tonight.”

(1) This was a type of death penalty in ancient China. Pretty self-explanatory, I think.

(2) I'm not sure if there's another way to translate this type of sword. It was a type of sword especially used in executions. Here's a picture: <http://goo.gl/lH8289>

(3) Songs/poetry always are difficult to translate, and require either a good knowledge of Chinese poetry, or a good bit of research. I'm pretty sure that Gu Long is taking a famous line from the philosophy of Zhuangzi to make this part of the song. Zhuangzi (a famous Warring States period philosopher) had a dream where he became a butterfly. Then he woke up and wasn't sure whether he was a man who had dreamed of a butterfly, or perhaps he was actually a butterfly dreaming that he was a man. Here's more deep info <http://goo.gl/9JtnFB>

(4) What I'm translating "every walk of life" is a Chinese idiom which means people of the "three religions and nine schools of thoughts." That would be referring to the three main religions of China (Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism) and the nine major schools of thought (Confucians, Daoists, Naturalists, Legalists, Logicians, Mohists, Political Strategists, Eclectics, Agriculturalists)

(5) He's addressing himself as a junior of a lower generation.

(6) He uses a cool idiom to describe a hazardous situation. The literal translation is "a dragon's pool or a tiger's den."

(7) This is really cool in Chinese. The word for hero is 英雄 yīng xióng, and the word being used for "ambitious person" is 枭雄 xiāo xióng, which means a fierce, ambitious, ruthless person. As you can see the last character is the same, so the words rhyme. "Shed no tears" in the original Chinese is 无泪 wú lèi, which literally means "without tears." And "ruthless" is 无情 wú qíng, which literally means "without emotion." This is the same word for "ruthless" that is in the title of "Sentimental Swordsman, Ruthless Sword." So the whole phrase in Chinese is 英雄无泪, 枭雄无情 yīngxióng wúlèi, xiāoxióng wúqíng. Or literally "heroes have no tears, the ambitious person has no emotion."

CHAPTER 12 – EVEN JUST A DANCE CAN OVERWHELM EMOTIONS

Part 1

The second month, the twenty-third.

Luoyang.

Blowing snow filled the sky.

Sima Chaoqun wore a wide bamboo hat and a felt cloak. He whipped his horse to charge faster through the winter's last snowstorm, charging from Luoyang toward Chang'an.

He knew that Zhu Meng was most likely already in Chang'an.

The Great Protection Agency's power was abundant, but too widely dispersed. Most of its top-rate talent was comprised of various Jianghu bosses, most of whom would not readily leave their bases of operation to travel to Chang'an.

The men Zhu Meng had led to Chang'an were soldiers prepared to die, each one worth more than ten men, with no intention of returning to Luoyang alive.

Zhuo Donglai would realize this, and wouldn't enter into an open battle.

But he would have a plan to deal with Zhu Meng, and his plan would certainly be extremely effective.

Deceitful, ruthless, contemptible, but extremely effective.

No one understood Zhuo Donglai better than Sima Chaoqun.

He wanted to get back as quickly as possible, and prevent Zhuo Donglai from doing something he would regret for his entire life.

He had climbed high enough, and felt extremely tired.

He didn't want to have to climb over Zhu Meng's carcass to get to the next level.

What method would Zhuo Donglai use to deal with Zhu Meng and Little Gao?

Sima Chaoqun didn't know, and hadn't thought about it. Fluttering snowflakes filled the sky like countless dancing butterflies. (1)

His heart suddenly sank, because he knew what Zhuo Donglai planned to do.

Part 2

The same day, Chang'an.

Chang'an Restaurant.

The first pavilion of Chang'an Restaurant, amidst sheets of cold, fragrant plum blossoms.

No fire burned in the building, as it was improper. To admire plum blossoms requires cold. The colder, the more fragrant; the colder, the more elegant.

This was something that could only be understood by a person who wears marten coats and drinks fine wines and has never felt the bite of hunger and cold. People who didn't eat well and couldn't dress warmly would never understand.

"I never thought the two gentlemen would arrive earlier than me."

When Zhuo Donglai entered the pavilion, Zhu Meng and Little Gao were already seated, and had already finished half a jug of wine.

“Stick your head out, there’s a blade waiting. Tuck your head in, there’s also a blade waiting. We decided to come, so why not come early? Freaking drink some of the free wine and have a good time.”

“Of course. Clan Leader Zhu is correct, arriving early is better.” Zhuo Donglai smiled. “The earlier you arrive, the more there is to see.” One by one, he opened all the windows. “Other than the plum blossoms, what else did the Clan Leader see?”

“I saw a huge pile of dog shit. I’m not sure which stray mutt shitted it out.”

Zhuo Donglai’s expression didn’t change, and he didn’t appear to be upset.

“I’m not too sure, either,” he said. “But I can guarantee that the mutt wasn’t sent by me to ambush you, and wasn’t a member of the Great Protection Agency.”

“How do you know it wasn’t from the Great Protection Agency?” Zhu Meng laughed coldly. “Did you ask it? Did you have a discussion with it?”

Zhuo Donglai was still wearing a smile.

“Some things don’t need to be asked,” he said. “For example, the pile of dog shit that Clan Leader Zhu saw, we know it was a dog who shitted it out, so there’s no need to ask the shit if it came from a dog, because neither dogs nor dog shit can speak.”

Zhu Meng laughed heartily.

“Well said, well said. I can’t measure up to you.”(2) He laughed and raised his cup. “I can only drink with you.”

“I can accompany you.” Zhuo Donglai raised his cup and then drained it. “But, there’s something both you and I understand in our hearts.”

“What’s that?”

“Clan Leader Zhu’s willingness to accept my invitation here was not because he wished to have a few drinks with me.”

“Oh?”

“Clan Leader Zhu came because he wants to see what trick Zhuo Donglai has up his sleeve.”

Zhu Meng laughed. “You’re right again. You’re completely freaking correct.”

His laughter suddenly ceased. His bloodshot eyes shot forth an expression as hard as lightning. “What trick do you have up your sleeve?”

“Actually, I don’t have any trick. Even if I did, the person to play the trick isn’t me.”

“If it’s not you, then who is it?”

Zhuo Donglai poured another cup and took a sip. Then, in his unique one-word-at-a-time way of speaking said, “I invited Clan Leader Zhu here tonight because someone is going to perform a dance for the king.”

The expression on Zhu Meng’s face flickered.

What feeling was he experiencing in his heart at this moment?

No one could imagine, and no one could describe it. The scraping of a blade, the stabbing of a needle, the burning of a fire; none of these could sufficiently describe the feeling.

Zhuo Donglai raised his glass to Little Gao.

“Die Wu’s dancing ranks best under heaven. It’s something not many people are able to see. You and me have a great privilege tonight.”

Little Gao didn’t say anything.

Zhuo Donglai laughed. “Although, what I invited Brother Gao here tonight to see is not a dance.”

“What did you invite me here to see?”

“A person.” Zhuo Donglai spoke one word at a time. “A person that Brother Gao very much wants to see.”

Little Gao’s expression also flickered.

—A woman whose name he didn't know, and a relationship that could never be forgotten.

Zhuo Donglai gave a carefree laugh. "It seems Brother Gao has already guessed who I'm talking about."

There was a crack as the wine cup in Little Gao's hand shattered. Fragments of the cup stabbed into his palm.

Zhu Meng suddenly growled like a tiger, his hand shot out, the veins protruding. He grabbed Zhuo Donglai's jacket. "Where is she? And where is this other person you're talking about?"

Zhuo Donglai didn't move at all. He looked coldly at Zhu Meng's hand and waited until it released his jacket. Then he slowly said, "The person I'm talking about will arrive at any moment."

It seemed his words were directed at Zhu Meng, and yet his eyes were fixed on Little Gao.

Part 3

At that moment, a glittering black carriage came to a halt in front of Chang'an Restaurant.

The faint sound of a stringed instrument could be heard from within the nearby trees. The music was beautiful, the accompanying lyrics sang of the vicissitudes of life, and were filled with a sort of helpless sorrow.

"Spring comes and spring goes, the flowers bloom and the flowers fall; when it comes time to part, who can remain behind?"

Die Wu sat mutely in the carriage, listening. In the wind, a dead, withered leaf fluttered out of nowhere like a butterfly, before landing lightly onto the snowy ground.

After pushing open the carriage door and stepping out, she picked up the leaf and stared at it dumbly, for a long time.

A drop of water fell down out of nowhere and landed on the leaf. It was impossible to tell whether it was a teardrop or a raindrop. It looked just like a dewdrop on a freshly bloomed flower petal in the middle of spring.

Part 4

Frigid wind filled the fragrant pavilion. Zhu Meng loosened the front of his jacket more. It seemed as if he wanted the cold wind to stab into his heart.

Neither he nor Little Gao said a word. Their throats had been stopped up by a sweet, strong, sour, bitter feeling.

A grizzled, white-haired blind man walked up into the pavilion, using a bamboo pole to tap the ground in front of him.

A little girl, her long hair tied in a braid, grasped the old man's robe and walked along with him.

The old man carried a bamboo flute, and the young girl held a pipa.⁽³⁾ It seemed they were to provide musical accompaniment for Die Wu's dance. Even though the old man's wrinkled face was expressionless, it seemed as if every wrinkle were a tomb that contained countless sufferings and sorrows.

The world has too many sorrows.

The little girl saw nothing, because she was blind. Blind from birth, she had never seen light, and had never experienced the joy of youth.

Two people like this, how could they play music filled with happiness and joy?

The old man walked in quietly and sat in the corner where he usually sat.

It wasn't his first time here, and every time he came, he played sad songs.

When you play sad songs for people who usually laugh a lot, the sound of the music can arouse their hidden sorrow.

Some people want this.

—People really are strange creatures. Sometimes they view sorrow and suffering as something to enjoy.

From downstairs could be heard more footsteps.

They were quick and light and distinct.

As soon as he heard the footsteps, Little Gao swept past the table toward the staircase and rushed down.

Zhu Meng didn't move at all.

His body seemed stiff, as stiff as the corpse of a rock, a corpse that had been dead for countless ages.

—A woman with an unknown name, and a relationship that could never be forgotten.

Little Gao had thought he would never see her again, and yet here she was in front of him.

—Was it a dream?

She saw him, too.

She stared at him dumbly. Was she surprised? Happy? Did she want to run to meet him? Or did she want to run away?

Little Gao didn't give her a chance to decide.

He rushed forward and took hold of her, grasping her hands.

This was no dream, and no illusion.

His hands were filled with a feeling of rich warmth, as was his heart.

“Why did you leave that day? Where did you go? Why are you here?”

Little Gao didn't ask any of these questions.

As long as they could see each other, those things weren't important.

"You're here, you're really here. This time I won't let you leave."

He pulled her back up the stairs, his eyes fixed on her face.

And then suddenly, her face suddenly changed, filled with a look of horror.

Her pupils suddenly contracted in terror, and then widened. It seemed like her body would collapse.

—What had she seen?

Little Gao looked at her in shock, and he was about to turn around to see what she was looking at.

But then, his face was also filled with a look of horror, as if he had seen something extraordinarily terrible. A long time passed. And then he finally dared to look back.

He turned his head, and looked at Zhu Meng.

The look on Zhu Meng's face was like that of a wild beast. A wild beast who had fallen into the trap of the hunter, heart-broken, furious, and hopeless. The person he was looking at was the same person Little Gao had pulled up the stairs.

Die Wu.

And in that instant, Little Gao suddenly understood everything.

Die Wu.

This woman, who he had found so enchanting, and felt he would never be able to forget, was Zhu Meng's enchanting, unforgettable Die Wu.

—How could fate be so cruel!

But this was not fate, and it was not coincidence. Not by any means.

Zhuo Donglai looked at them, his eyes filled with the laughter of an evil god watching simple humans make sacrifices at his altar.

Freezing hands.

Everyone's hands were freezing.

Little Gao let go of Die Wu's freezing hands, and started walking backwards. He kept walking until he reached a corner.

Zhu Meng's stared at his face, and his bloodshot eyes seemed to have transformed into spears.

Spears dripping with blood.

Little Gao died.

Even though his body didn't die, that bloody spear had pierced his heart.

But this death was not a release.

—What would Zhu Meng do to him? What should he do to Zhu Meng?

Little Gao didn't dare think about it, and couldn't. He wasn't able to think.

The only thing he could do was leave.

Who would have thought that just as he was about to leave, a voice would suddenly say, "Wait a moment."

Little Gao was shocked to find that Die Wu had recovered her composure, and was suddenly unafraid to face him.

"I know you want to leave, that you feel you must leave," said Die Wu. "But you need to wait a moment before you go."

Composed and resolute, her eyes radiated a power that it seemed no person could resist.

Only when someone is afraid of nothing can they summon this kind of power.

Die Wu turned to face Zhu Meng. "I remember you once said that when I dance, no one is allowed to go."

Zhu Meng's fists were clenched, as if he wanted to grab the world and crush it to pieces, destroy everything.

Zhuo Donglai laughed. He smiled eerily at Die Wu and said, "You can still dance?"

"Have you ever seen the silkworms in spring?" she answered. "As long as they are not dead, they will continue to spin silk. I'm the same. As long as I'm still alive, I can dance."

Zhuo Donglai clapped his hands together. "Well then, that's excellent!"

The fox-fur cloak fell, the dancing garments fluttered.

The white-haired musician, who had been sitting quietly in the corner, stood up. His wan, tired faced looked like a piece of yellow, wrinkled paper.

"I'm blind, old and blind," he said slowly. "My heart has long since been empty of any happiness. So, I always play sad songs for the great men here. But today, I want to make an exception."

"You want to play a happy song for us?" asked Zhuo Donglai.

"Yes."

"Did you think of something happy today?"

"No."

"No? Then why do you want to make an exception today?"

The white-haired musician stared off into the darkness with his two unseeing eyes. His voice was hoarse and sad. "Even though I'm blind, old and blind, I can still sense that there is too much heartbreak here today."

There was a twang as the pipa sounded out. The old man's first note sounded as if it were played on a silk string that could move the soul. The

single silk string transformed into countless silk strings; the pipa's music sounded like pearls falling on a plate of jade.

Every string of silk, every pearl, was graceful and joyous. What he played today was definitely not a song of helpless sorrow.

What he played was a song of the joy of life.

Die Wu danced.

Her dancing was also filled with joy, as if she had forgotten all of the sorrow in her life.

Her life and her dance had been fused together.

Because all she had left in her life was dance.

Because she was a dancer.

In this instance, she was no longer the person who had experienced the sorrows of life, a suffering woman. Instead, she was a dancer; noble, pure and beautiful.

In her dance appeared her happiness and youth, and in her dance, her happiness and youth also faded away.

“The treasured sword is ruthless, Zhuangzi dreams no dreams;
Dance for the king, transform into a butterfly.”

The old man playing the pipa suddenly began to weep.

He played a joyful tune, yet tears filled his empty eyes.

He could not see the people in the room, but he could sense them.

—Such sorrowful people, such darkness.

His happy tune could only make sorrow more sorrowful. It was as if his joyous melody had transformed into a type of ridicule.

There was a “pa” sound as one of the pipa strings broke.

The dance was also broken.

Die Wu fell down like a leaf at Zhuo Donglai's feet. And suddenly, from within Zhuo Donglai's bootleg she pulled out a dagger.

The short dagger glittered like a gem.

She raised her head and looked at Zhu Meng, then she turned and looked at Little Gao.

The dagger in her hand had descended, descended toward her knees.

Blood splattered.

As soon as the dagger descended, blood splattered.

Underneath the blade of the dagger, her legs had become like two rotten logs.

After the dagger descended, she was no longer a dancer. There are no dancers in the world with severed legs.

Such beautiful legs, so lithe, so nimble, so beautiful.

- (1) Don't forget that Die Wu's name literally means Butterfly Dance.
 - (2) Here he is referring to himself as "Laozi" again, which is a way to talk to people who you view as your inferior.
 - (3) Pipa is a type of stringed instrument. <http://goo.gl/qTOx2>
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CHAPTER 13 - LAUGHTERHOUSE

Part 1

The second month, the twenty fourth.

Chang'an.

Before dawn.

The sky was a dark sheet, darker than any other time during the day.

Gao Jianfei sat alone in the darkness, so cold that it seemed his blood would soon freeze.

"I did no wrong," he kept telling himself. "I didn't let Zhu Meng down, and I didn't let her down. I did no wrong."

Love is fundamentally not wrong.

It is never wrong to fall in love with someone.

When he fell in love with Die Wu, he didn't know she was Zhu Meng's woman, never even imagined she could be.

But every time he thought of the look on Zhu Meng's face when he saw Die Wu, he felt a knife-like stab of guilt and remorse.

And so he'd left.

At first, he'd wanted to rush over to Die Wu as she laid there in a pool of blood, forget about everything and just hold the only woman in his life, take care of her forever, love her forever, regardless of whether or not her legs were severed, just love her.

But Zhu Meng had already rushed over to hold her, and so he'd left quietly.

He could only leave.

—How far could he go? Where could he go to? How far did he have to go to be able to forget?

Who could answer these questions for him?

As daylight approached, the ground seemed to grow colder. Little Gao laid down on the snowy ground and stared up at the darkness of the heavens.

Then he closed his eyes.

With his eyes opened, he could only see a sheet of darkness, why not close his eyes?

“Will I die like this?”

He had closed his eyes, so he could only hear the cold voice of a person say, “This winter in Chang’an at least four or five people died like this in the cold, frozen like rocks. Even stray dogs couldn’t bite a piece off of them.”

Little Gao ignored him.

—When life suddenly becomes this painful, why not just die?

But it seemed this person wouldn’t let him die.

His jaw was wrenched open, and he felt something burning go down his throat and into his stomach.

His stomach suddenly felt like a roaring furnace, and warmth filled his body.

He opened his eyes and saw someone standing in front of him like a rock. In his hand was a box.

An ordinary person, an extraordinary box.

If this person wanted someone to live, he would find it difficult to die. And if he wanted someone to die, he would find it difficult to keep living.

Little Gao understood this.

"It's good alcohol." He sat up, trying as hard as possible to act nonchalant. "Is it Lu Zhou liquor?" (1)

"Seems so."

"You can't conceal the truth about this kind of thing from me. When others were still drinking milk, I had already started drinking alcohol." Little Gao laughed, and it seemed as if it were a happy laugh. "Some people are born heroes, some people are born swordsmen, and some other people are born alcoholics."

"You're not an alcoholic." The man looked coldly at Little Gao. "You're a bastard."

Little Gao laughed heartily. "Bastard, then. Anyway, what's the difference between bastards and alcoholics?"

"There's a difference."

"What difference?"

"When you see it you'll understand."

"See what? Where?"

The man suddenly grabbed him by the side and flew with him into the air. They passed over countless rooftops before coming to a stop.

"Here," he said. "Here you can see."

They stood on the eaves of a tall building, overlooking an expansive garden.

The building was the first pavilion of the Chang'an Restaurant.

Part 2

The sky was growing bright, and in the murky, early-morning light, the red flowers were as elegant and bright as before. The strange thing was, the snowy ground also seemed to be covered with flowers.

"If you think those are flowers, you're wrong," said the man with the box. "It's not flowers, it's blood."

Little Gao's heart sank.

He knew it was blood, and he knew whose blood it was.

When Zhu Meng had arrived, he'd left his subordinates here, in preparation for the battle to the death with Zhuo Donglai.

"You must have known that Zhuo Donglai wouldn't be unprepared," said the man with the box. "His men weren't here, they were outside. He knew you would have your forces stationed here, so he surrounded you from outside."

Zhuo Donglai had mobilized three-hundred and twenty men, all of the best men he could muster.

"Even though he had several times as many men as you, Zhuo Donglai wasn't willing to act rashly."

"Because he knew that the men who had come from the Lion Clan were true men who didn't fear death, and were here to go all out, regardless of the risk to their lives."

"Risk to their lives?" the man with the box laughed. "Do you think risking one's life does any good? If you risked your life going up against me, would it do any good? Would I be so scared that I wouldn't make a move?" His question was sharp and without emotion, in a way that made it impossible to respond to. He didn't even give Little Gao a chance to respond.

"Sometimes risking one's life only amounts to delivering oneself up to death. Zhuo Donglai wasn't afraid of those men."

"Who was he afraid of?"

"You!"

Little Gao laughed, a bitter laugh. "Don't tell me you've forgot about my battle with Sima at the Great Wild Goose Pagoda?"

"But Sima is not in Chang'an."

"Where is he?"

"In Luoyang," said the man with the box. "He's not like Zhuo Donglai. He has the same heroic spirit as Zhu Meng. It's just that he's controlled too much."

"If Sima was in Chang'an, and was sent by Zhuo Donglai, how could he possibly deal with you and Zhu Meng? If his subordinates made a move first, would you let him go?"

Little Gao looked at the flower-petal-like bloodstains on the snow, and cold sweat broke out on his back.

If it hadn't been for Die Wu, they would have had an excellent opportunity to execute Zhuo Donglai before the banquet.

"That was your one and only chance, and you let it slip away, because you left," said the man with the box. "Of course, you should have left, because you're a true man, and wouldn't fall out with Zhu Meng because of a woman." His voice was biting cold. "But did you ever think that you left at a time when Zhu Meng needed you the most? You left him a woman with severed legs, because you thought yourself a true friend. But I think you're a truer friend to Zhuo Donglai, because you left him Zhu Meng and the Lion Clan's eighty-six brothers."

Little Gao couldn't say anything, not even a single word. His clothes were completely soaked with sweat.

"So they risked their lives," said the man with the box, "and sadly it didn't do much good. After you left, this place became a slaughterhouse. Do you know what a slaughterhouse is like?"

Little Gao slowly lifted his head and stared at him, his voice hoarse with sorrow. "I don't know. Do you?"

"Of course I know, because I was here when it happened."

“You sat here and watched all those people slaughter each other like livestock?”

“I not only watched, I watched very carefully. I saw every sword stroke very clearly.”

“Did it make you happy to watch?”

“Not very happy, but not very sad,” said the man with the box, coolly.

“Because it’s your issue, and has nothing to do with me.”

Little Gao had been struggling to hold back his fury, but it finally burst forth like flames from a furnace.

“Are you human?”

“Yes.”

“If you’re human, how could you sit by and watch others be butchered like animals?” The strength of his question would move anyone who had emotions. “Why didn’t you save them?”

The man laughter was cold enough to soak through to one’s marrow. “Why didn’t you stay behind and save them? Why did you you lay down in the snow to wait to die?”

Little Gao said nothing.

“If you really want to die, you don’t need to go look for death, because Zhuo Donglai has already planned it for you. He’s made arrangements with someone who can send you to your death at any time.”

“Sending me to my death isn’t an easy thing,” laughed Little Gao coldly.

“Who is this person?”

“It’s true that not many people can send you to your death, but this person has never failed in an attempt to kill someone.”

“Oh?”

“You must know that some people in Jianghu make a living by killing others. The higher their prices, the less likely they will fail.”

“And he found the person with the highest price?”

“Yes.”

“You know who this person is?”

“I do. He’s surnamed Xiao, the same character ‘xiao’ as in the expression ‘the whistling of the sword energy.’(2) His full name is Xiao Leixue.”

“And you are Xiao Leixue.”

“Correct.”

Little Gao was completely composed. Only this kind of stabbing surprise could have pulled him out of his sorrow and confusion into composure.

The morning fog began to rise. He looked at this mysterious man, more mysterious than the fog itself, and sighed.

“This is really disappointing. I really never imagined that you would kill others for money.”

“I also never imagined it,” said Xiao Leixue. “It’s been a very long time since I killed anyone for money. That sort of thing isn’t very interesting.”

“So why are you making an exception?”

Xiao Leixue didn’t answer directly. His ash-like gray eyes filled with a mysterious expression.

“Everyone has a rope attached to their body, and most people are slowly bound tighter and tighter by it throughout their lives. For some people, the rope is family, wife, and children. For others, it is money, achievements, and responsibilities. People like you and Zhu Meng aren’t bound by those types of ropes, but you make ropes of your own nonetheless.” He stared at Little Gao. “Emotions. Your emotions are too powerful, and they are your rope.”

“And you?” asked Little Gao. “What is your rope? What kind of rope could fasten you?”

“It’s a contract.”

“Contract?” Little Gao didn’t understand. “What contract?”

“A contract of assassination.”

Xiao Leixue’s voice seemed to be coming from a distant place. “Right now I’m a hermit with more wealth than most countries. But twenty years ago, I was nothing but a nameless vagabond. I was like you, without friends, without relatives, without roots. Without anything except for this box.”

“The box is a weapon designed to kill people, so you started making a living by killing people?”

“The people I killed deserved to die. If I didn’t kill them, they would eventually have been killed by someone. Even though my prices are high, I’m very trustworthy. If I take a contract, I always complete it.” His voice was filled with ridicule, self-ridicule. “It’s because of this that I’m not able to sleep at night.”

“But eventually you washed your hands of it,” said Little Gao coolly. “Because you had made enough money.”

“Correct. I did eventually wash my hands of it, not because I had made enough money, but because one night after killing someone, I found that I couldn’t sleep.” He grasped his box. “People in my profession all agree that that is the most fearful thing that can happen.”

“So why are you still bound by your rope?”

“Because the contract I’m referring to is my earliest contract. It stipulates that at any time or place, he can ask me to kill someone. It doesn’t matter when or who, I can’t refuse.”

“And you never fulfilled the contract?”

“Never,” said Xiao Leixue. “Not because I didn’t want to, but because that person never came looking for me to fulfil it.”

“So, the contract is still valid.”

“Correct.”

“Why would you sign a death contract like that?” Little Gao seemed surprised. “The price he payed must have been enormous.”

“Correct.”

“How much did he give you?” asked Little Gao.

“He gave me a life.”

“Whose life?”

“My own. When I signed the contract, he could kill me at any place or time.”

“Killing you isn’t easy. Who is this person?”

Xiao Leixue refused to answer. “I can only tell you that the contract has been returned to me and there is a name on it.”

“The name of the person for you to kill?”

“Correct.”

“And the name is Gao Jianfei?”

“Correct.”

Xiao Leixue looked calmly at Gao Jianfei. Gao Jianfei looked calmly back at him. They were extraordinarily calm, as if killing and being killed were ordinary matters.

A long time passed.

Then, Gao Jianfei asked, “Do you know where Zhu Meng’s corpse is? I would like to go pay my respects.”

“There is no corpse of Zhu Meng,” said Xiao Leixue. “For the moment, he’s not dead.”

Little Gao's breathing suddenly ceased. "He killed his way out again?"

"He didn't kill his way out. Zhuo Donglai let him go. Otherwise he would never have had a chance."

"Why did Zhuo Donglai let him go?"

"Because Zhuo Donglai wants to leave him for Sima Chaoqun," said Xiao Leixue. "Zhu Meng's death will cause a huge sensation in Jianghu. He usually leaves those types of things for Sima Chaoqun to accomplish." He slowly continued, "To build up a hero isn't an easy matter."

"Right. It's definitely not."

After saying this, they both closed their mouths. Far in the distance could be seen a wisp of red smoke climbing up. In the midst of this murky early morning light, it looked almost like a stream of blood piercing the snow.

Then the wisp of smoke was dispersed by the wind. In a very strange voice, Xiao Leixue said, "There's a special place I need to go to, and you're coming with me."

Where did the wisp of red smoke rise from? Did it have some special significance?

—Was it a signal? Was it a warning?

What was this special place? Why did Xiao Leixue want to bring Little Gao with him?

Sometimes people will pick a special place to kill someone. Was this place another slaughterhouse?

It wasn't a slaughterhouse, and actually didn't appear to be special at all. It seemed to be just a tiny village temple. A tiny temple situated on a remote path.

The gods of this small temple were a couple, earth spirits, and had clearly been long neglected. On this bitterly cold early morning of the second month, there definitely would be no incense burning.

Little Gao stood mutely next to Xiao Leixue, looking at the images of the spirits. They had seen the hypocrisy of the world, experienced together the transformations of time. He suddenly felt an indescribable loneliness.

He suddenly felt that these two simple spirits, who from ancient times had never been regarded as important, were more blessed than the mighty immortals and shining gods who resided at the top of the highest heavens.

—Die Wu. Why did you have to be Die Wu? Why couldn't you be another woman?

He hadn't asked about whether she was alive or dead, or where she was.

He couldn't ask.

Because she didn't belong to him, and he only hoped that he could take the few days they'd had together and make it into a dream.

Part 3

What was special about this place? Why did Xiao Leixue bring him here? What was he going to do?

Little Gao didn't ask. Xiao Leixue said, "They know everything. Everything I did all those years, they know about all of it."

"They?" asked Little Gao. "Who are 'they?'"

"Them." He was looking at the statues in the shrine. "This Earth Spirit grandfather and grandmother."

Little Gao didn't understand, and Xiao Leixue knew this.

"Twenty years ago, the people who could afford to hire me as an assassin all knew about this place," he explained. "They would come here and leave the name of a location and a person. The location is where I would go to get the money, and the person was who I was to kill."

—A remote village temple, a secret corner, a loose red brick, a carefully rolled strip of paper, an exorbitant price, a life.

So simple, and so complicated.

“If I believed that the person should die, then I would go to the location and retrieve the money. There is only ever money, never a person. My clients have never seen my face.”

“And what about those who have died by your hand?”

“People who force others to spend so much money on an assassination are usually worthy of death,” said Xiao Leixue. “So this little village temple is probably Chang’an’s greatest center of business.” Cynicism filled his voice. “Our profession is one of humanity’s most ancient professions, and definitely the most ancient profession for men.”

Little Gao understood.

As for the most ancient profession of women, it was a bit more ancient because women have access to the most natural of resources.

“Sixteen years. Sixteen years and three months. Such a long period of time.” Xiao Leixue sighed. “In that period of time, people were born, people grew old, people died. But this place doesn’t seem to have changed at all.”

“You haven’t been here in sixteen years?”

“Not until the day before yesterday.”

“After sixteen years, why would you suddenly come back?”

“Because I saw something I last saw sixteen years ago, what people in Jianghu call ‘blood fire’ smoke.”

“That’s the same as the smoke we just saw?”

“Yes.” Xiao Leixue continued, “When the blood fire appears, some important person in Jianghu will suddenly die. So, some people call it the ‘command of death.’ A bewitching command of death.” His explanation continued, “When someone leaves a message for me here, they must then go to the outskirts of

the city and set off the red smoke. Starting in the early morning, three times. What you saw just now was the third time.”

“So when you came here the day before yesterday, you received the contract that you must fulfil.”

“Yes.”

“The person who traded your life for the contract was Zhuo Donglai?”

“No, it wasn’t him,” said Xiao Leixue coldly. “He’s not worthy.”

“But you think Zhuo Donglai is behind it.”

“I know. Of course I know.” His words were very strange: “After that person disappeared from the world, I could never figure out where he went to hide. Only now do I know.”

“That person” who he referred to was undoubtedly the person with whom he had entered into the contract.

—Who was this person? What mysterious relationship did he have with Zhuo Donglai?

Little Gao didn’t want to ask these question. He was exhausted, so completely exhausted that he felt he would collapse at any moment. But then, his vitality arose once again.

“I know that I’m in your hands. If I die under your hand, I can die satisfied, because I know that it’s at least better than dying under the hands of someone else. But, killing me won’t be easy.” He stared at the box in Xiao Leixue’s hand. “If you want to kill me, you have to open your box first. You have to open it before I draw my sword.”

His sword was in his hand. It was no longer wrapped in black cloth. Alone in Chang’an, he had long since prepared to draw it.

Xiao Leixue slowly turned around and looked at the hand holding the sword. Suddenly, a very strange expression filled his eyes.

The knuckles of the hand that held the box suddenly grew white. The veins bulged.

—When the treasured sword appeared, gods and ghosts trembled in fear.

—Whose tearstains marked the sword?

—Grandmaster Xiao's.

—The treasured sword had already been forged. Why would he shed tears?

—Because he had foreseen a calamity. He foresaw within the spirit of the sword, that his only son would die beneath this blade.

—His only son is Xiao Leixue?

—Yes.

Part 4

Mist roiled in the bathing room. Zhuo Donglai was bathing, and it seemed as if he urgently desired to purge last night's bloodstains from his body.

Located behind his quarters, the bathing room had been built as sturdily as a hidden treasure room.

Because he would not allow anyone to enter when he was bathing.

Because when bathing, people must be naked, and he was no exception.

Other than when he was a baby in his mother's arms, Zhuo Donglai had never allowed anyone to see him naked in his entire life.

Zhuo Donglai was deformed, hypoplastically deformed. (3)

His left leg was somewhat shorter than his right. The reason for his hypoplasia was that while in his mother's womb, he had been squeezed by another person.

And that person was his younger brother.

Zhuo Donglai was a twin, and should have had a younger brother. A younger brother with whom to share their mother's love and nourishment.

But he was born first, and by that time his brother was dead in his mother's womb. Dead along with her. "I'm a murderer, a natural-born murderer." Zhuo Donglai would often call out in this way during nightmares. "My first act in life was to kill my mother and brother."

He'd often believed that his deformity was a punishment from heaven. But he wasn't completely convinced.

His incomparable determination and willpower overcame the congenital defects. After he grew up, no one could see that he was lame, and no one knew how much time had spent, how much pain and sweat he had experienced, just to be able to walk like a normal person.

But unfortunately there was something else that he was powerless to change, no matter what price he paid.

He could never really be a man. There was one part of his body that would always look like a baby's.

The veins on the back of Zhuo Donglai's hands bulged, popped out by the hot water. He liked to bath in scalding hot water.

His bathing facilities had been specially designed to replicated Japanese 'furo' bathtubs. (4)

When he soaked in the boiling water, he felt as if he were back at his brother's side, feeling his heat and pressure.

—Was he abusing himself? Was he punishing himself?

Did he amuse himself by abusing and punishing others?

Right now Zhuo Donglai wasn't thinking about these things. Right now he was thinking about something much more amusing. He was thinking about Little Gao and Xiao Leixue.

One was the greatest master in the world, who carried the most fearsome weapon under heaven.

But his fate had been preordained, his life certain to be taken by the treasured sword forged by his father.

The other person should die by his hand, as there was no way for him to escape.

But that person had the treasured sword.

—Which of these two people would die?

Zhuo Donglai found this question very amusing, extremely amusing.

He couldn't help but laugh.

And yet before the cold laugh could come out, his smile froze.

His pupils constricted.

Only when he was truly frightened or anxious would his pupils constrict. And now he had that feeling.

He could sense that someone had used an unfathomable technique to open the door to this secret room, and stood like a ghost behind him.

This truly was unbelievable. He never imagined that someone in the world would have this type of unbelievable skill.

But he had to believe.

He suddenly thought of a person. The one and only: "Xiao Leixue. I know it must be you."

"Yes." His voice was deep and hoarse. "It's me."

Zhuo Donglai suddenly let out a long sigh. "Gods and ghosts can't be relied on. And all the sayings about spirits are just as unreliable. Otherwise, you wouldn't have come."

“Why?”

“Because you should be dead, dead beneath Little Gao’s ‘Tearstains.’ Your death was destiny, your demise preordained by the spirit world.” He sighed again. “Now I know that this type of talk is ridiculously absurd.”

“What about before?” asked Xiao Leixue. “Before, you believed?”

“I didn’t believe, and I didn’t disbelieve.”

“So you thought of a way to get me to go after Gao Jianfei. You wanted to see which of us would be able to kill the other.”

“Yes.”

“And regardless of who died, you wouldn’t be sad.”

“No, I definitely wouldn’t be,” said Zhuo Donglai. “Whoever died, it would benefit me. And if you both died, it would be too wonderful for words. I would definitely take care to arrange all of your affairs after your death.”

What he said was the truth. Zhuo Donglai always spoke the truth.

Because he didn’t need to lie.

In front of most people, he had no need to lie, and in front of others, lying was useless.

Xiao Leixue could see this.

He liked fighting with people like this, it cut out a lot of needless frustration.

Having a fight with a person like this was much more enjoyable than having that person as a friend.

“I always tell the truth, too,” said Xiao Leixue. “You’d better believe every word I say.”

“I definitely believe.”

"I know you've never seen me. You surely must wish to see what kind of person I am."

"Yes, it's killing me."

"And yet, if you turn your head and even glance at me, you'll never see anything ever again."

"I won't turn my head," said Zhuo Donglai. "At the moment I don't wish to die."

"Speaking the truth is a really good habit. And I really hope you'll keep on living." Xiao Leixue's voice was very flat. "If you speak one lie, I'll see that you die in that wooden tub."

"As I said, I don't wish to die at the moment." Zhuo Donglai's voice was also very calm. "I definitely don't want to die naked in a wooden tub. You should believe me that I won't turn around."

"Very good."

Xiao Leixue seemed to be satisfied with the situation, and so he finally asked the question he so wanted to ask.

"Twenty years ago, I signed an assassination contract with someone. You know about this?"

"I do."

"The most important part of the contract was left blank. It lacked a person's name."

"I know about this, too."

"Someone sent the contract back to me, and a name had been filled in. Do you know whose name it is?"

"I do." Zhuo Donglai suddenly laughed. "I was the one who filled in the name. How could you not know?"

"Was the contract between me and you?"

“No,” said Zhuo Donglai. “I’m not worthy.”

“Was it you who delivered it to me?”

“Yes,” said Zhuo Donglai. “Someone sent me to deliver it. First I took the contract to the little village temple. Then I went to the outskirts of the city to light the fire. To make sure you would see it, I lit the fire three times every day.”

“Someone sent you.” Xiao Leixue’s voice suddenly became more hoarse. “Do you know who this person is?”

“I know,” said Zhuo Donglai. “Everyone who knows about him thinks he died long ago. Many people don’t know his name, but I do. I know. There is no one in the world who knows more than me.”

“You know that he’s not dead?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know where he is?”

“Yes.”

“Very good.” It seemed as if Xiao Leixue’s voice had been ripped to pieces. “You can stand now.”

“Why must I stand?”

“Because I want you to take me to see him.”

“Can I not go?”

“No.”

Zhuo Donglai stood. When matters could not be argued with, he would never argue.

“You can put on your marten fur and your shoes,” said Xiao Leixue. “But you’d better not do anything else.”

Zhuo Donglai stepped out of the bathtub and put on his marten fur.

He moved very slowly, his every movement very cautious.

He could hear the animosity and killing spirit in Xiao Leixue's voice.

Xiao Leixue wouldn't kill him or chop off his legs. But if Xiao Leixue thought even one of his movements was out of place, there would definitely be some part of his body removed.

He would never give anyone this chance.

Xiao Leixue was certainly watching him very carefully, watching his every movement in extreme detail.

"I know that you're a very arrogant person, that your reaction and speed are extremely quick, and that you have practiced your family's qigong extremely well," said Xiao Leixue. "In the future, not very many people will be able to defeat you. I think even Sima Chaoqun is no match for you, because he cannot achieve the same state of calmness that you can. I've never seen someone as calm as you."

"I've thought this before too," said Zhuo Donglai with another laugh. "Everyone gets narcissistic sometimes, especially late at night when no one is around and they are a little drunk."

"You've never seen me, and have never seen me fight. How do you know that I'm more powerful than you?" asked Xiao Leixue coolly. "Did you ever think that perhaps you could kill me?"

"I never thought of it," said Zhuo Donglai. "I never even considered thinking about it."

"Why not?"

"Because I control my thinking." Zhuo Donglai's laughter seemed to contain a bit of sadness. "If a person wishes to continue on living, they will not think about that kind of thing."

Xiao Leixue laughed coldly. "So you'd rather turn into someone who follows orders like a dog, not daring to make a move?"

“Correct,” said Zhuo Donglai. “There are many situations in the world like this.”

Part 5

The door to the small courtyard was closed.

Zhuo Donglai knocked. First three times, then once.

This secret knock had been devised by he and the old man. But there was no response from within the courtyard.

“He’s not here?”

“He’s here,” said Zhuo Donglai. “He’s definitely here.”

“So you’re notifying him that someone is here that shouldn’t be, and you want him to flee?”

“I’m sure you know that he wouldn’t flee. He’s never fled before in his life. Besides, he knew all along that you would come looking for him.”

And yet no response came from the little courtyard. Zhuo Donglai knocked again, harder than last time.

Then suddenly the door opened, just a sliver.

It had been open the whole time, neither locked nor bolted from the inside.

The old man hadn’t left.

Within the peaceful courtyard, the flowers were as fragrant as always, the ancient pine tree was there as always, and the old man sat in the pavilion as always, facing the snowy ground, as if he were watching Die Wu dance as always.

But Die Wu would never dance again.

And the old man would not grow older again.

Only thinking and emotion will make people grow old. If a person cannot think, and cannot feel, they will not grow old.

The old man had no thoughts, and could not think, judge or plan anything.

The old man was without emotions, and would never again feel heartache, pain, happiness, frustration, lovesickness or memories.

Only dead people have no thoughts or emotions, and only dead people cannot grow old.

The old man was dead.

He appeared to be alive, sitting in the pavilion with an incomparable air of elegance and leisure. But he was dead.

His eyes, which had carried a mixture of the wisdom of old age and the mischievousness of a child, no longer shone like the sun shining on the sea. They would never again glitter with the brilliance of the sun and the blueness of the sea.

His eyes had become gray, like the sky when it is just about to grow dark and begin snowing.

After seeing his eyes, Zhuo Donglai couldn't take another step forward.

His whole body went stiff, as stiff as the body of the old man.

And then he saw Xiao Leixue.

Xiao Leixue didn't appear to be very tall, but he was still taller than most people, and very thin.

His hair, pitch black, without a trace of white, sat coiled on top of his head, bound with a pale gray cloth.

He wore a garment made from the same cloth. The fit was not suitable and the tailoring was poor.

He carried a box in his hand, an old-fashioned and ordinary box.

This was all that Zhuo Donglai saw, because he could only see Xiao Leixue's back.

The person who had been behind him like a shadow this whole time suddenly blew past him like the wind.

What did he look like, the most mysterious and fearsome person in Jianghu? Zhuo Donglai still couldn't see his face.

But some people who never display emotion on their face will sometimes unconsciously reveal their emotions through their back.

Xiao Leixue's back was taut, every single muscle, and then it began quivering, as if it were being lashed by an invisible whip.

The old man's death was the whip.

One could tell from the tone of voice when he spoke that this man was no friend of his.

There must have existed some sort of indelible hatred between them.

Most likely, he forced Zhuo Donglai to bring him here because he wished to use the old man's blood to wash his heart clean from the hatred and enmity.

But the old man had already died. Why would he have such a fierce reaction, filled with pain and sorrow?

But even more surprising was Zhuo Donglai.

He was not a broad-minded person, and would never allow anyone to encroach on his dignity.

No one in the world had ever insulted him the way Xiao Leixue had, and this type of insult could only be washed away with blood.

If he killed Xiao Leixue, no one would find it strange or feel sorry.

Even if he literally drank Xiao Leixue's blood, no one would be upset.

Xiao Leixue was not the type of person people felt compassion for, and Zhuo Donglai really should have killed him. As soon as he had an opportunity, he should have done so.

This was his best opportunity.

At the moment, Xiao Leixue's back was like a fertile, unprotected field, just waiting for someone to trample it underfoot.

At this moment, his emotions were the most agitated, and he was most likely to make careless errors or mistakes.

And yet Zhuo Donglai didn't move a muscle.

The opportunity was like a cloud that suddenly floated past, fleeting, never to return. Zhuo Donglai's breathing suddenly stopped, and his pupils constricted.

He finally saw Xiao Leixue, the most mysterious and fearsome person in the world.

Xiao Leixue had suddenly turned to face Zhuo Donglai.

He had an ordinary face, but his eyes looked like a sword that had just been unsheathed.

"If someone had wanted to kill me, just now was the best opportunity. There will never be an opportunity like that again."

"I know."

"Why didn't you make a move?"

"Because I don't want to kill you." He spoke truthfully. "I never thought of killing you."

"You should have thought about it," said Xiao Leixue. "You must know that I will kill you."

"You will kill me?" His eyes never left Xiao Leixue's face. "I thought you would never kill people for free."

"I'll make an exception this time."

"Why?"

"Because you killed him."

Zhuo Donglai's eyes shifted to the old man in the pavilion. "You think I killed him? You think he would die under my hand?"

"Originally, you could never make a move against him, not even against one of his hairs. Your martial arts aren't bad, but in the time it would take to lift his hand, he could send you to your grave."

"Maybe even one finger would be enough."

"But things changed. Before his death, someone crippled him."

"You can see that his internal qi skills were crippled?"

"Yes, I can."

"You saw just now?"

"Yes."

"But, I knew all along. I knew it many years ago."

"Oh?"

"When he arrived here, his skill had already been crippled. That is why he came to live here in the first place. I'm sure you can imagine why."

Xiao Leixue couldn't argue.

Twenty years ago, the old man had not been old, and in Jianghu there were few who could match him.

He could roam under the heavens, flitting about like a cloud. Why else would he choose to hide here, residing under the roof of someone he detested, unless he had lost his inner power?

"He obviously wouldn't think highly of someone like me, but he still came here. Because he knew there were some good things about me."

"What good things?"

"I'm reliable. Very reliable. My character is reliable and my word is reliable."

"Oh?"

"No one in Jianghu knew that his inner power had been lost. And no one knew he was staying here. My lips were sealed."

This, Xiao Leixue couldn't deny.

"Many in Jianghu sought after his life," said Zhuo Donglai. "If I wanted to betray him, he would have been dead by another's hand long ago. And if I personally had wanted to kill him, there would have been no need to wait until now."

It seemed this was a fact as well.

"Also, he saved my life. So when he was in the most danger, he came to me. Do you think I would slay my own benefactor?"

"You would. Others wouldn't kill their benefactor, but you would."

Zhuo Donglai laughed bitterly.

"However, despite the fact that his power was lost, his mind remained," said Xiao Leixue. "And inside it were inexhaustible precious deposits, buried treasures of knowledge, and secrets more valuable than any pearls or jewellery in the world." He looked coldly at Zhuo Donglai. "You didn't kill him before because he was useful to you."

Zhuo Donglai said nothing. A period of time passed, and then he let out a long sigh. "Correct," he admitted. "I killed him."

Xiao Leixue's fist clenched. It was the fist holding the box, the box that could kill anyone in the twinkling of an eye.

“Actually, he was very useful to me all this time.” Zhuo Donglai heaved a sigh. “But sadly, he reached the point where he could no longer be allowed to go on living.” He looked at the box in Xiao Leixue’s hand. “You’re prepared to make your move?”

“Yes.”

“Before you do, can you tell me one thing?”

“What thing?”

“Is the reason you’re going to kill me that you want to avenge his death?” Zhuo Donglai didn’t wait for Xiao Leixue to respond. He answered the question himself. “No, it’s not. It’s definitely not to avenge his death. I can see that you hated him, more than anyone in the world. If he was alive now you would kill him.”

“Correct,” admitted Xiao Leixue immediately. “If he wasn’t dead, I would kill him.” His voice was again hoarse with bitterness. “But before I made my move, I would have asked him something. Something that only he could tell me, a secret only he could explain.”

“What secret?”

“You don’t know what I wanted to ask?”

Zhuo Donglai responded, “What if I did know? Would you let me go?”

Xiao Leixue stared at him coldly, and didn’t say another word. He sighed.

“Unfortunately,” said Zhuo Donglai, “I don’t know. I really don’t.”

“That is unfortunate.”

What question did Xiao Leixue want to ask?

With the old man dead, no one in the whole world could explain the secret.

Zhuo Donglai was dead; anyone should be able to see that his death was inevitable.

Xiao Leixue had already begun opening his box.

—What is the most fearsome weapon under heaven?

—It's a solitary box.

The box was fearsome, and the person carrying the box was even more fearsome.

Zhuo Donglai's pupils yet again began to constrict.

His eyes stared at Xiao Leixue, his face dripped with cold sweat, the muscles in his body quivered.

A “beng” noise sounded out as the box opened. Opened just a sliver.

A sliver like that of the seductive eyes of a lover.

Part 6

Regardless of the time or place, if this box opened even a sliver, then someone would be brought to judgement like an animal.

And then the place would become a slaughterhouse.

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- (1) Lu Zhu is a pretty famous type of baijiu <http://goo.gl/ml1UBn>
 - (2) Here the 'xiao' character is doubled up to make up an onomatopoeia to describe a whistling sound.
 - (3) This is a medical condition in which parts of you don't grow correctly.
<http://goo.gl/eoHHmx>
 - (4) Here's info about furo baths: <http://goo.gl/kei1b>
-

CHAPTER 14 – WHO IS AN ANIMAL?

Part 1

The second month, the twenty-fourth. Noontime.

The Guan Luo road.

Sima Chaoqun lashed his horse, loosening the reins, speeding it forward.

He sped toward Chang'an.

His horse tore along, galloping at full speed. He had already changed horses four times on his journey.

Every horse had been top quality, and fast. He knew horses, and was willing to spend a lot of money buying one.

He urgently wished to arrive in Chang'an.

Of the four horses, and all of them had ended up collapsing.

Sima Chaoqun felt the same, completely exhausted, about to collapse.

Because he must reach Chang'an.

A frightening and inauspicious premonition filled his heart, as if a dear relative was about to be slaughtered like an animal.

The same day, the same time. Chang'an.

The same old Chang'an. Chang'an was the same as before, the people were the same as before.

The person with the box was waiting to make his kill just as before, and the person without a box was waiting to be killed just as before.

There was no snow, and no sunlight.

The gloomy sky looked like the eyes of a young girl who has been crying for too long, devoid of charm and color. To those eyes, the box looked just as ordinary as before, just as old fashioned. Awkward and ugly.

But the box had already opened.

The ordinary, ugly pieces of metal inside the box had in the twinkling of an eye been transformed into a weapon that could not be defended against, and in just as short a time period, Zhuo Donglai would soon be killed.

From the time he was young all the way into the prime of his life, Zhuo Donglai had always wielded a sword.

He had used many types of swords. When thirteen years of age, he had used a butcher's knife, which he had pilfered directly from a butcher's chopping block, to kill the tyrant of the fish and meat market, "Boss Pig-killer." Since then he had changed blades many times.

When he was fourteen he had used a folded iron broadsword, at fifteen, a pure steel horse-cutter, and at sixteen, a ghost-head blade. At seventeen he replaced his single blade with double blades, a pair of mandarin duck butterfly swords. At twenty, he replaced his double blades with a single blade, an extremely heavy, extremely dignified golden-backed mountain-chopping blade.

At twenty-three, he had used the most dignified weapon in all of Jianghu, a purple-gold fish-scale blade.

But after the age of twenty-six, the blades he used yet again changed, from the resplendent to the ordinary.

He once again used a folded iron broadsword, a goose-quill sabre, even a foreign monk's knife.

Isn't it true that one can see the changes in a person's sword skill and personality from the changes in the weapons they use?

Regardless, regarding knowledge and understanding of “blades” and “sword skill,” almost no one in the martial world could compare to Zhuo Donglai.

So after reaching the prime of his life, he no longer needed to use a sword.

He could take a tangible sword and make it intangible, could defeat a sword with no sword. And yet he still used a sword.

Concealed in his boot was an incredibly sharp dagger that could cut through iron as if it were mud, or cut through two legs as if they were made of tofu.

—Die Wu’s legs, so lithe, so nimble, so beautiful.

Flower-petal-like drops of blood splattered everywhere. Die Wu stopped dancing, would never dance again.

Then Zhu Meng fled. Little Gao left.

And Zhuo Donglai snatched up the dagger, carrying with it the gory soul of a dancer. And so once again it lay concealed in the boot of this ice-cold person.

This dagger was a blade among blades, created by Zhuo Donglai after countless bitter lessons, setbacks and victories alike.

It was the essence of everything he had experienced.

What method would Xiao Leixue use to assemble a weapon that could overcome this blade?

He definitely had a method.

He had never failed in an attempt to kill someone.

Part 2

The same day, afternoon.

The main road outside of Chang'an city.

As Chang'an neared, Sima Chaoqun's state of mind grew more agitated than ever. The inauspicious premonition was stronger than ever.

It was as if he could see one of his closest relatives calling out from within a pool of blood.

But he couldn't see who it was.

This time, the people who should soon be dead were Gao Jianfei and Zhu Meng. He did not see how they could escape death.

But their deaths did not really concern him. They were not related to him, and were not friends.

What of Wu Wan? Could it be Wu Wan?

It couldn't be.

She was a woman, and had never harmed another. Furthermore, she lived a life of seclusion at home. How could she have befallen any sort of calamity?

Could it be Zhuo Donglai?

That was even more improbable. Zhuo Donglai's resourcefulness and martial arts would allow him to protect himself in any situation.

Even if the Great Protection Agency had befallen some great calamity, he would definitely have escaped safely.

Other than these people, he really had no other relatives in the world.

To whom did this horrible, inauspicious premonition relate?

Sima Chaoqun could not imagine.

And even less imaginable to him was the fact that Zhuo Donglai was currently like a helpless animal beneath the claws of a tiger, a fish on the chopping block.

Part 3

The same day, the same time.

Chang'an.

Zhuo Donglai's fate was most certainly sealed. He knew that Xiao Leixue had never before failed in an attempt to kill someone.

And yet, he wasn't dead.

There was a "beng" sound when the box opened, and Xiao Leixue's long, dextrous, powerful fingers went into motion.

Once he moved, the metal pieces in the box would be assembled in an instant to form a deadly weapon, something that could definitely overpower Zhuo Donglai's blade.

And yet in that exact moment, his fingers suddenly grew stiff.

His whole body grew stiff.

After a very long time, he lifted his head and faced Zhuo Donglai. His face was completely emotionless, but his eyes were filled with the expression of a dying wild animal facing a hunter, furious and sorrowful.

Zhuo Donglai looked at him.

The two men faced each other. Neither spoke, nor moved.

More time passed, who knew how long. Suddenly, footsteps could be heard on the path outside the small courtyard, and then Zhuo Qing appeared.

Four men followed him. One carried a drinking vessel, another carried some clothing and a hat, and the remaining two carried a violet sandalwood chair, covered with a violet sable skin.

Zhuo Donglai put on a pair of pants and some stockings, then donned the leather hat. He sat down gently into the chair, and poured some red wine into the violet crystal drinking cup. He let out a light sigh. "This is much more comfortable."

Xiao Leixue wasn't listening, and wasn't watching. All of this, it seemed he wasn't watching. Anyone who looking at this scene would definitely think they were dreaming.

This couldn't be happening.

He was the most fearsome enemy under heaven, with the most fearsome weapon; life and death hung on a breath, then suddenly Zhuo Donglai started acting completely relaxed and carefree, so much so that he called for people to bring a change of clothes. He was even drinking.

An intelligent and clear-headed person would never do something like this.

And yet Zhuo Donglai had.

After the box opened, Xiao Leixue didn't move at all.

This mysterious and fearsome person seemed like a spectre from hell, whose spirit had suddenly been recalled by the lord of the netherworld, and whose body had become like an ancient, fossilized corpse.

Zhuo Donglai poured another cup of wine and took a sip. He turned and asked Zhuo Qing, "Do you know what's going on here?"

"I don't."

"Do you know what kind of person Mr. Xiao is?" Zhuo Donglai answered his own question. "He's an amazing person. In the last twenty or thirty years, the number of Jianghu heroes and experts of the martial world who have died under his hand number at least forty or fifty."

Zhuo Qing listened.

"It's said that the box he has in his hand is the most fearsome weapon under heaven. I've never been a very humble person, but I truly believe that all he has to do is make a move, and I would be dead."

He looked at the box in Xiao Leixue's hand.

"He already opened the box, because he wants to kill me, and yet up to now he hasn't made a move." Zhuo Donglai was very calm. "All of a sudden, he would rather just stand there like an idiot watching me drink, and not do anything."

Xiao Leixue wasn't listening.

Whatever Zhuo Donglai said, it seemed he wasn't listening at all.

Zhuo Donglai suddenly laughed.

"It's not that he doesn't dare to kill me. In Mr. Xiao's eyes, someone like me is no better than a dog." He looked at Zhuo Qing, "Do you know why he hasn't killed me?"

"I don't know."

"He hasn't killed me because he has no way to kill me," said Zhuo Donglai. "The only thing he can do now is stand there and wait for me to kill him. Kill him like a dog. In fact, killing him might be easier than killing a dog."

This should not be happening.

No one would dare insult Xiao Leixue in this way, much the same way that no one had ever dared to insult Zhuo Donglai.

"Zhuo Qing, let me ask you. Do you know how the incomparable, matchless Mr. Xiao could suddenly change into a dog?"

"I don't know."

"You should be able to see, or at least see a little bit," said Zhuo Donglai coldly. "If you can't see, I'm afraid you'll have a hard time living to twenty years of age."

"Yes," said Zhuo Qing. "I should be able to see at least a bit."

"What can you see?"

"It seems someone used a special method to immobilize Mr. Xiao. He can't use any of the power in his body whatsoever."

"Correct!"

"Mr. Xiao used to be a dragon among men, not a dog. But Mr. Xiao also knows that if the dragon dies, even if it is a celestial dragon, it can't compare to a dog." He spoke very calmly, because he was merely stating the facts.

"But dogs can die as well."

"Of course. Sooner or later. But not at the moment. Whether it be dragon, person, or dog, being able to live one moment longer is better than dying."

With life, there was hope. Even if it was only a sliver of hope, it should not be abandoned.

"Sadly, I don't see how he can have any hope now," said Zhuo Donglai. "I'm afraid anyone who is poisoned by 'Fragrance of the Gentleman,' will be left without any hope."

"Fragrance of the Gentleman?"

"The friendship of gentlemen is as pure as water. The sincere and honest gentlemen is as warm and kind as jade. Fragrance of the Gentleman is the same."

"The same?"

"As clear and fluid as water, colorless, odorless. As gentle and beautiful as jade." Zhuo Donglai's voice was also very warm. "The only difference is, the gentleman in Fragrance of the Gentleman is a hypocrite. Because it is a poison." He laughed. "The friendship of gentlemen is as cleansing as the spring breeze, and the poison of this gentlemen is also like the spring breeze. It can make a person unwittingly become intoxicated. And once intoxicated, one's emotions will overcome one's spirit, and one will be lost forever."

“How could Mr. Xiao have been poisoned by something like this?”

“Because in Mr. Xiao’s eyes, I’m nothing but a dog, an obedient dog. In front of Mr. Xiao, there are some things I don’t dare even think of, because as soon as I think of them, it would be revealed in my expression, and would be very difficult to conceal.”

Zhuo Donglai poured another glass of wine.

“Mr. Xiao obviously never imagined that I would have come earlier and placed Fragrance of the Gentleman onto the jacket of a dead person. As soon as Mr. Xiao approached the body and moved the clothing, Fragrance of the Gentleman would float like the spring breeze into his face.” Zhuo Donglai sighed. “Mr. Xiao never imagined that a dog would do something like this.”

“Yes,” said Zhuo Qing. “In the future, I will never view other people as dogs.”

The old man was dead, and the secret that Xiao Leixue so wished to understand had died with him.

When he caught sight of the dead old man, of course he would check to see if he was really dead. And how he had died.

And of course, it would be difficult to look for the cause of death without disturbing the clothing on the body.

Zhuo Donglai had planned ahead of time in case Xiao Leixue lived, and had thus prepared the Fragrance of the Gentleman.

It was really a simple matter, very simple.

Simple and fearsome.

Zhuo Donglai let out another sigh. “When this old man was alive, he was no gentleman. Who would have thought that after he died he would have the fragrance of a gentleman. Sometimes a gentleman really is fearsome.”

His words were not gems of wisdom, nor food for thought or philosophy.

They were simple facts.

Part 4

By dusk, Sima Chaoqun had returned to Chang'an.

He had resided here longer than any other place in his life. He was familiar with most of the streets and roads, and yet it seemed that as of now there had been a great change.

Although, it was not the ancient city of Chang'an that changed, but rather he himself.

And yet he couldn't say what exactly had changed, nor when the change had occurred.

—Was it when he'd set foot on that blood-stained, slab stone street? Or was it when he'd listened to Oxhide talk of Cleats' bloodstained bravery?

If one must trample the corpses of others to climb up, even if one reaches the peak, it would not be a joyous occasion.

Men and horses both can become exhausted.

As he lashed his horse down an out-of-the-way little street that ran along the city wall, he suddenly caught sight of someone familiar from behind.

This person had already blended into the shadows of the city wall, and then disappeared into the darkness without turning his head.

But Sima Chaoqun was certain that it was Gao Jianfei.

When he wasn't drunk, his memory and vision were much better than others.

—How could Gao Jianfei still be alive? How could Zhuo Donglai have let him go?

—Had the Great Protection Agency and the Lion Clan already faced off?

Sima Chaoqun wanted to chase after Gao Jianfei and ask him, but he was more anxious to return home and see whether the frightening premonition had come to fruition.

Right now the sky had grown dark, and his state of mind was unstable. In these circumstances, it would be easy for anyone to misidentify another.

Perhaps the person wasn't Gao Jianfei after all.

If Xiao Leixue hadn't died beneath "Tearstains," then Gao Jianfei must certainly be dead.

Once he had entered into a contract to kill someone, Xiao Leixue would never let them go for any reason.

He definitely wouldn't make an exception for Little Gao.

Little Gao was a worthless Jianghu wanderer, and had nothing to do with him.

Part 5

Little Gao also couldn't figure out why Xiao Leixue hadn't killed him. He'd tried to think of different reasons, but none seemed satisfactory.

He really couldn't think of any justification for why Xiao Leixue had let him go.

The fact that he lived was really a miracle.

Sima Chaoqun hadn't judged wrong. The person he'd just caught sight of really was Gao Jianfei.

Little Gao had also seen Sima Chaoqun as he galloped past on his horse.

He'd avoided him on purpose. Other than Zhu Meng, he didn't want to see anyone else.

He was looking for Zhu Meng, and had searched every dark corner of Chang'an.

This was a time in which Zhu Meng most needed a friend. Even if Zhu Meng didn't consider him to be a friend any more, he would not abandon him. No matter what.

—If Zhu Meng was still with Die Wu, what would he do when he saw Little Gao?

Little Gao had considered this embarrassing likelihood, but he had already firmly resolved to face anything and everything with courage.

The night grew darker.

As the darkness of ancient Chang'an pressed down on Little Gao, his spirits sank more and more.

—Zhu Meng was a true man, open-minded and deeply concerned with personal relationship.

—Zhu Meng should understand his predicament, and should be able to forgive him.

But what about Die Wu?

Little Gao clenched his fists and strode forward. Suddenly, a blade flashed; a shining, snow-white broadsword slashed out of the darkness toward his face.

The blade descended, clearly intent on splitting his head in two.

But whoever it was that wanted to split Gao Jianfei's head into two, they would find it a difficult task. He had a sword in his hand.

This blade attack was not very fast, the technique not very amazing. Gao Jianfei could easily unsheathe his sword, counterattack and kill the person hiding in the shadows.

But he did not unsheathe his sword.

Because at that moment he caught sight of a white strip of cloth tied around the person's head. He also saw the person's face.

His name was Man Niu, and he was one of the bravest members of the Lion Clan, one of the eighty-six warriors Zhu Meng had brought to Chang'an to die. (1)

Even though he had never officially met this man, he considered himself to be his brother, a brother with whom to share weal and woe.

This attack was definitely made in error.

"I'm Little Gao, Gao Jianfei." His body flashed, and the blade met nothing. It hit the ground. Sparks flew in all directions.

Within the darkness, two blood-red eyes stared at him.

"You are Little Gao. I know you are Little Gao.(2)" He suddenly howled. "F*ck your mother!!!"

As he howled, he chopped down again with his blade. In addition to Man Niu's blade, other blades appeared.

These blades were not well-forged, and their wielders were no experts. But each attack was filled with hatred and fury. Each wielder was clearly attacking without thought to their lives.

Little Gao wasn't afraid to die.

With his sword skill, he could rip the throats out of each and every one of these people in an instant. And at the same time, he could not.

And yet, he also could not allow himself to be killed.

He attacked with his sheathed sword, and in an instant, the other blades fell to the ground. The wielders also fell, immobilized.

The wielders of the blades did not retreat. Their eyes still shone with venomous hatred and fury.

"Very well. Gao, your skill is amazing," said Man Niu hoarsely. "If you dare, slaughter all of us. If you leave even one of us alive, then you're a son of a bitch."

"I don't understand," said Little Gao angrily. He was shaking. "I really don't understand."

"You don't understand? F*ck your ancestors. If you don't understand then who could?" Man Niu howled angrily. "We viewed you as a person!(3) Who knew that you were really just an animal? When we were risking our lives and dying, where were you, you animal? Were you off stealing someone else's woman?"

"Now I understand. But... you don't," he said sadly. "There are some things you will never understand."

"What do you want?"

"I want you to take me to see Zhu Meng."

"You are really freaking shameless." Man Niu stood up. "You really have the face to confront him?"

"I must see him," said Little Gao, struggling to keep cool. "You have no choice but to take me."

"Fine. We'll take you!"

Another man stood up. He charged toward the city wall and smashed his head against it. It burst like a pomegranate.

Hot blood splashed everywhere, and Little Gao's heart grew cold. Man Niu howled again.

"Do you want to see him so you can drive him crazy? Fine. We will take you to him."

He charged head first toward the city wall. But Little Gao had already learned his painful lesson. He quickly grabbed Man Niu and threw him to the ground, then, without turning back, disappeared.

He shed no tears.

Because his tears had already been dissolved into his blood.

Heroes shed no tears, the tears have been dissolved into righteous blood.
When the black blade passes, does it leave behind tears, or blood?

**

(1) Man Niu's name literally means: "Man" rough, fierce, barbaric, and "Niu" ox, cow. Basically his name sounds really strong and cool.

(2) The word he is using to refer to himself 俺 an, makes him sound somewhat uneducated and unrefined.

(3) During this whole conversation he uses the word 老子 laozi, to refer to himself and his buddies, which is something you say when you are looking down on the person you are talking to or view yourself as their superior.

Part 1

The second month, the twenty-fifth.

Chang'an.

A lamp.

A light-purple, crystal lamp, and a yellow flame. Beneath the lamp, a solitary box, a solitary, old-fashioned, ordinary box.

There was also a person beneath the lamp, but it was not the silent, ordinary person who usually carried the box.

The person under the lamp was Zhuo Donglai.

There was not yet light in the sky, and so the lamp burned, the lamplight shining on the left side of his face, seemingly soft and gentle.

Today, this half of his face seemed just like the face of a kind father.

When someone is completely satisfied with themselves, they tend to treat others in a somewhat kinder fashion than usual.

Zhu Meng was within his grasp, the Lion Clan had disintegrated, and Gao Jianfei was dead, or at least, so he believed. Everything was under his control.

His enemies had been eliminated, and he had gained complete power. No one in Jianghu would ever again be able to contend with him. Under these circumstances, even the most insatiable person would feel satisfied.

His life's work had reached its summit.

So, he hadn't killed Xiao Leixue.

As of now, Xiao Leixue's situation was exactly the same as the old man's had been. His power gone, he sat in the small courtyard, waiting for Zhuo Donglai to squeeze the knowledge out of his mind and extract his wealth of secrets.

That of course could wait. Zhuo Donglai wasn't in a hurry.

A professional killer with his power gone was like an old whore who no one cared about, with no road to travel, and no place to go.

These two professions were the most ancient in the world, the sorrows they spawned were also the most ancient tragedies in the world.

Xiao Leixue's box was now in Zhuo Donglai's hands.

He knew that this box was the most fearsome weapon in the world. The day that the Lion Clan traitor Yang Jian had been assassinated, he learned of its fearsomeness.

Many people in Jianghu would be willing to sell their soul to get their hands on it.

Luckily, he wasn't that type of person. He was completely different.

Right now the box sat in front of him, but he had no inclination to even touch it.

That was because he had another weapon, even more fearsome. His intelligence.

When he wielded his intelligence, he was more fearsome than any person or any weapon.

—Xiao Leixue may be an unparalleled master, yet he'd never even had a chance to make a move.

—Zhu Meng might be brave and daring, and the Lion Clan strong and powerful, yet in the time it took to raise a hand, he had routed them.

He had reached this point not only because he had taken advantage of every opportunity, but also because he could create opportunities.

When others thought he was defeated, when he was in danger, he would not become flustered and nervous, but would instead devise an opportunity to rout his foe, to turn defeat into victory.

This type of person was truly strong.

Spears, axes, blades, swords were the weapons of ordinary people. So was this box.

Zhuo Qing had been standing in front of him for a very long time. Savoring victory was somewhat like savoring an olive. One needed to chew slowly for a long time to truly enjoy the flavor. And so, Zhuo Qing prepared to leave quietly.

Zhuo Donglai suddenly called to him, in a soft and gentle voice: "You worked hard all night. Why not sit and have a drink?"

"I don't drink."

"You can learn to," said Zhuo Donglai with a smile. "Learning to drink isn't very difficult."

"But now is not the time for me to learn to drink."

"What are you waiting for?" Zhuo Donglai's smile had disappeared into the darkness. "Are you waiting until you're able to ..." Before finishing his sentence he suddenly changed the topic. "Have you gotten Mr. Xiao settled down?"

"Yes."

"When you left, how was he? Did he speak?"

"No," said Zhuo Qing. "He was the same as before, as if he didn't care about anything at all."

“Excellent.” Zhuo Donglai smiled again. “To submit to the will of Heaven, to resign oneself to the situation, is a sign of true intelligence. This type of person should live a long life.”

“Yes.”

Zhuo Donglai’s smile seemed to contain the sharpness of an awl.

“Sometimes I feel that he is similar to me in many ways. He will not attempt to do things he is incapable of doing. He won’t even think about them.” He continued on coldly: “If someone likes to do things they are incapable of doing, they will eventually die a violent death. Gao Jianfei is a perfect example.”

“Gao Jianfei isn’t a good example,” said Zhuo Qing.

“He’s not? Why?”

“Because he isn’t dead.”

“You’re certain that he’s not dead?”

“I am. Yesterday at dusk, Zheng Cheng saw him with his own eyes, leaving the city with his sword.”

“Zheng Cheng?” Zhuo Donglai seemed to be searching his mind for the name. “How do you know that he really saw Gao Jianfei?”

“As soon as he learned of his whereabouts, he returned to report to me.”

“And you trust him?”

“I trust him.”

Zhuo Donglai’s smile yet again disappeared, but his voice was even more gentle: “Correct! You should trust him. If you want others to trust you, you should first let them know that you trust them.”

He seemed as if he suddenly wished he had not said what he just said, as he changed the topic again.

“Have you thought about where Gao Jianfei would go to?”

“He will surely go to the brothel in the Red Flower Bazaar to look for Zhu Meng. Since Zhu Meng isn’t there, he’ll return, so I didn’t have Zheng Cheng follow him. As long as he is in Chang’an, he is in our grasp.

Zhuo Donglai smiled happily.

“You definitely can begin learning how to drink. You’re qualified to drink, more qualified than most people.”

He suddenly stood and placed his wine cup in front of Zhuo Qing.

Zhuo Qing picked it up and drained it.

The wine was sweet, but his mouth was bitter and sour.

He realized that he had spoken too much, and he wished he could recall his words. It would have been better to cut off his hand.

Zhuo Donglai did not seem to notice. He took the empty cup and refilled it, then sat down and took a sip.

“Xiao Leixue knows that Gao Jianfei is fated to be his undoing. He has never broken a contract in his life. Why didn’t he kill Gao Jianfei?” Zhuo Donglai was lost in thought. “Do they have some special relationship? What relationship?”

He suddenly drained his cup, and his eyes shone. “It must be that the old man knew the nature of their relationship. Xiao Leixue wanted to ask him about it, so it was surely something very important. When the old man died, his heart became filled with murder, because no one in the world other than the old man could tell him whether or not Gao Jianfei is his son.”

“His son?” Zhuo Qing had resolved not to say anything further, but he couldn’t hold back from asking, “How could Gao Jianfei be Xiao Leixue’s son?”

“You think it’s impossible?” Zhuo Donglai laughed coldly. “Gao Jianfei is an insignificant youth. Why would the cold-blooded Xiao Leixue save him? If they do not have some special relationship, then even if there were a hundred thousand Gao Jianfeis dying in front of him, Xiao Leixue wouldn’t lift a finger.”

He looked at Zhuo Qing, his voice once again very soft. "Believe me, anything can happen. For example, how could Zhu Meng, such a stalwart man, be defeated because of a woman? And yet he was defeated, a bitter defeat. Xiao Leixue is the same. Who would ever have thought that this day would come?"

He let out a long sigh. "Actually, I'm the same. How could I ever imagine who it is that might defeat me?"

Perhaps this statement wasn't completely true, but it did contain truths worth pondering.

Zhuo Qing suddenly left.

He knew that it was time for him to leave, because Sima Chaoqun had arrived.

He heard Sima Chaoqun's voice: "Correct. No one could have imagined that this would happen."

Part 2

The door was open, and Sima Chaoqun stood there. Outside was thick with milk-white fog.

He was a middle-aged man, his hair and clothing in disarray from his frantic, long-distance journey, and he appeared to be completely exhausted.

And yet standing there, he still seemed as grand, brilliant and robust as ever. He appeared to be much younger than his age, and standing there with the fog at his back, the lamplight flickering on him, he looked like a god in a painting.

In this aspect, no one in Jianghu could match up to him.

Even if his martial arts were only half as good, he would still be regarded as an esteemed and respected hero.

He was born to be this type of person.

Zhuo Donglai looked at him, and his eyes suddenly filled with admiration. He quickly stood and poured him a glass of wine.

—Why did you go to Luoyang? Why did you deceive me by pretending to be ill?

Zhuo Donglai did not ask these questions.

At times when he could sense Sima Chaoqun's bad mood, he would carefully avoid unhappy topics like this.

"You must be very tired, and you must have pushed extremely hard. I originally calculated that you would be returning tomorrow." He smiled. "How is the weather in Luoyang?"

Sima Chaoqun said nothing. He wore a very strange expression. A long time passed before he finally spoke. "The weather is fine, better than here. The blood on the streets dried very quickly, much more quickly than here."

His voice was somewhat strange, but Zhuo Donglai didn't seem to notice.

"When blood flows," Sima continued, "it will dry eventually. It doesn't really matter whether it dries sooner or dries later."

"Yes," said Zhuo Donglai. "Many things in the world are like this."

"And there are many things in the world that are not like this."

"Oh?"

"People live, and eventually die. But there is a huge difference between dying sooner and dying later. If you want to kill someone, can you wait until after they are dead before making your move?"

"No," replied Zhuo Donglai. "When killing people, you must be prompt. When the opportunity passes, things will change, and the circumstances will be different." He smiled and raised his glass. "Drinking is the same. You must drink promptly. If you wait until later to drink, the wine will become sour."

“Correct,” agreed Sima Chaoqun. “Extremely correct. It seems that when you speak you never say anything wrong.” He lifted his glass and drained it. “This glass I drink to you, because yet again you won a beautiful victory for our Great Protection Agency.”

“You already know everything that happened?”

“I know. I’ve been back for a while, and I’ve been thinking.”

“Thinking about what?”

“About you.”

Sima Chaoqun’s expression was even more strange. “I’ve thought about everything you’ve done for the past thirty years. I’ve thought about everything in great detail. I can’t help but believe more and more that you are an amazing person. I can’t compare to you at all.”

There was still a smile on Zhuo Donglai’s face, but it had become stiff. “Why would you be thinking about things like this?”

Sima Chaoqun didn’t respond. Instead, he turned around.

“Come with me,” he said. “I want to take you to see some people. After you see them, you’ll understand.”

Part 3

The first rays of morning sunlight began to appear, and the color of the fog grew thicker.

Inside the small courtyard were no flowers, but instead cabbage, green peas, radishes, lettuce, cucumbers and garlic.

The vegetables had all been planted by Wu Wan, as Sima Chaoqun loved to eat freshly picked produce.

This was why the courtyard had no flowers, only vegetables.

Everything Wu Wan did was for her husband. For her husband and her two children.

Their children were very obedient; from the time they were young, Wu Wan had educated them very well. She had never allowed them to come into contact with the affairs of adults, and had never allowed them to wander around outside of the house.

Outside was the territory of the Great Protection Agency. Those people and the things they did were not for young children to see.

Arriving here, Zhuo Donglai suddenly realized that he hadn't seen Wu Wan or the children for several days.

That was carelessness on his part.

For the sake of his friendship with Sima, and for the sake of the future prospects of the Great Protection Agency, he made a resolution to never again bring up the matter of Guo Zhuang. He would treat Wu Wan and the children better in the future.

Part 4

The bottom floor of the small building contained halls; a main hall, and a smaller parlour for drinking. Even though guests rarely came to visit, Wu Wan had decorated the two halls to make them feel very quiet and peaceful.

Her room and the children's room was on the second floor. They all lived together with a wet nurse and two serving girls who had been provided as part of her dowry.

Her husband didn't live in the house.

Sima treated her well, and treated the children well, but at night he didn't stay here.

The sky was not yet bright, and the second floor lamps were not lit. Wu Wan and the children must still be deep asleep.

—Why would Sima Chaoqun bring him here to see them?

Zhuo Donglai didn't understand.

When the wind blew the milky white fog in through the open bedroom window, it became a deathly gray color. It transformed the previously elegant and peaceful house into something unspeakable gruesome. It was also cold, bone-chillingly cold.

The braziers had long since burned out.

Why would such an attentive mother not keep the braziers lit for her children?

No light, no fire, just wind.

Looking into the room from the ghastly, gloomy fog, it appeared as if within, someone was floating in the wind.

Floating in mid-air.

—How could someone be floating in mid-air? Who was this person?

Zhuo Donglai's heart suddenly sank, and his pupils constricted.

He had trained his eyes for many years to be as sharp as an eagle's.

He could now see that it was a person hanging in the air, hanging from a rope.

It was Wu Wan.

She had tied the rope into a noose and attached it to the roof beam, then wrapped it around her throat.

As soon as her legs left solid support, the noose would embed itself into her neck.

She was dead.

From time immemorial, death has been difficult to avoid. To do so is truly challenging. But sometimes death is so easy.

In addition to Wu Wan, there were others in the room. An old wet nurse with hair as white as frost, two young servant girls as young as flowers, and two adorable children.

Two adorable children with limitless prospects in life. Just looking at them would make one feel joy in one's heart.

But now, the wet nurse's white hair would grow no longer. The slave girls would never have a chance to grow old. And the children would never again make people feel joy in their heart in a single glance. Instead, they would make people feel knife-like pain and misery.

—The children, so adorable, so miserable.

"I let you down, and so I die. I must die. I can only die. But the children shouldn't die.

"And yet, I must let them accompany me in death.

"I don't want them to be children without a mother, and I don't want them to grow up and become people like your friend Zhuo Donglai.

"Old Miss Cui is my wet nurse. When I was small, it was her breast milk that raised me. She always treated me like her own daughter.

"Little Fen and Little Fang are like my little sisters.

"If I die, they don't wish to keep on living.

"And so we will all die.

"I don't want your forgiveness, I just want you to keep on living. I know that without us, you will be able to have a good life."

So cold, so cold, so cold. Zhuo Donglai had never felt this cold before.

This elegant little room was actually a tomb, and he was in the tomb.

It felt as if all the muscles and veins and even the marrow in his whole body was completely frozen.

“What happened? When did this happen? Why did Wu Wan want to die?”

“You don’t know?”

“I don’t know,” said Zhuo Donglai. “I really don’t.”

“They’ve been dead at least three or four days, and yet you don’t know.” Sima Chaoqun’s voice was as cold as ice. “You really looked after them quite well. I should be very grateful to you.”

His words were like a long, cold needle stabbing from the top of his skull to the bottom of his feet.

He had many of reasons to offer in explanation.

—These days he had been completely engrossed in dealing with the Lion Clan. This place belonged to Wu Wan and the children, he and other Great Protection Agency men rarely came here.

He didn’t explain.

In this situation, no explanation that could be offered. Any explanation would be meaningless.

Sima Chaoqun hadn’t looked at him the entire time, and he couldn’t see the expression on Sima’s face.

“You asked me, why did Wu Wan want to die?” said Sima Chaoqun. “At first I didn’t understand either. She was not old, she had a good figure, she always loved the children. Even though she wasn’t completely faithful to me, she always fulfilled her duties as a wife.” His voice was strangely calm. “But I didn’t fulfil my duties as a husband. So the person in the wrong is me, not her.”

“You know about what happened?”

"I know. I knew a long time ago. The husband isn't always the last one to find out. I also realized that soon it would all be in the past. She would still be my lovely wife, and she would still take care of our children."

He went on coldly, "I always knew that there would be a price to pay if I went along with your idea to become the hero of the times."

"And so you pretended that you knew nothing."

"Correct," said Sima Chaoqun. "If I knew, I would have to kill her. This kind of affair cannot occur in the household of a great hero, I would have no choice but to kill her. And so, I could only feign ignorance. Because it's my house, and I couldn't allow anything to tear apart my family. Actually, pretending not to know wasn't enough, I had to make her believe that I suspected absolutely nothing. Only in this way could I preserve my family."

Zhuo Donglai was completely shocked.

He suddenly realised that he didn't completely understand Sima Chaoqun after all. He had never imagined that Sima had this side to his personality. He was such an emotional person, and yet after encountering this situation he was still able to take others into consideration.

"Most men would not be able to tolerate something like this," said Sima. "But I came to a realization. If I waited for it to go away, waited for the children to grow up, we would still be like the other husbands and wives, relying on each other, spending the years growing old together."

He turned and faced Zhuo Donglai. "If you hadn't pushed her to her death, it would have been like that."

"I pushed her to her death?" Zhuo Donglai's voice was hoarse. "You really believe I pushed her to her death?"

"You not only pushed her to her death, you pushed Guo Zhuang to his death, and sooner or later you will push me to my death. Because you will always need people to do things your way."

He stared at Zhuo Donglai. "Because you have a sickness in your heart. On the outside you seem like you think so much of yourself, but in your heart, you hate yourself. And so, you need me to go do all the things that you

yourself should do. You need me to become the heroic idol, because in your heart, I am the embodiment of you. If someone gets in the way of your plans, you will do anything to destroy that person. And that is why Wu Wan is dead. Because you think that she impeded your plans."

Zhuo Donglai stood in quiet contemplation for a very long time.

"You just told me that you had thought for a long time, and thought about many things." Zhuo Donglai then asked, "Have you reached the point where you need to make a decision?"

"Yes."

"And have you made your decision?"

"Yes."

"What have you decided to do after this?"

"It's not about what happens later, it's about now," said Sima Chaoqun. "Right now, I need you to leave, and never let me see you again. Never again have anything to do with me."

Zhuo Donglai suddenly seemed like he might not be able to keep standing, as if he had suddenly been struck on the head with a stick.

"You can take anything with you, but you must leave," said Sima Chaoqun resolutely. "Before sundown today, you must be far away from Chang'an."

Zhuo Donglai suddenly laughed. "I know you really don't mean it," he said softly. "You've been hurt, and you're very tired. You just need some rest, and then you'll forget about everything you just said."

Sima Chaoqun looked at him coldly. "This time, you're mistaken. You will leave. You have no choice but to leave. Do you remember what I just said? You must kill people at the appropriate time, and never let the right opportunity slip by. This situation is the same."

Zhuo Donglai's pupils constricted again. "If I don't leave?" he asked, one word at a time. "If I don't leave, will you kill me?"

“Yes,” responded Sima Chaoqun in the same tone of voice. One word at a time he said, “If you don’t go, then I will kill you.”

Part 5

The sky had begun to grow light, but, in contrast, a furtive, ghastly horror filled the room.

Because, the light made more clear the horrible death that filled it.

Those who are exceedingly lovely in life, will be exceedingly horrible in death.

Zhuo Donglai and Sima Chaoqun faced each other. Cold wind blew in through the window, cutting at them like a knife.

“I could have left,” said Zhuo Donglai. “A person like me can go anywhere. But as of now, I can’t leave.”

His voice had suddenly become strangely calm.

“I’ve spent a lifetime of painstaking care creating the person that you are. I can’t let you be destroyed by someone else.” One word at a time, he continued, “You know what kind of person I am. There are things I would rather do myself.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Haven’t we always understood each other?”

“Yes,” said Sima Chaoqun. “And so I’ve prepared myself.”

“When?”

“Any time,” said Sima. “When killing people, you must be prompt. These words will forever be etched in my heart.”

“Where?”

“Here.” Sima looked around at the corpses in the room. They were the corpses of the people in his life he was most close to, and each one arose in him an unforgettable feeling. Their deaths had inflicted upon him a pain that made him regret his entire life.

Zhuo Donglai felt the same.

If Zhuo Donglai also died here, then everything important in his entire life would be dead.

“Here,” said Sima Chaoqun. “What other place could be better?”

“There is none.” Zhuo Donglai let out a long sigh. “There really is none.”

Part 6

There are special types of people in the world who, when you look for them, cannot be found, but when you need them, they will be close by, and will not disappoint you.

Zhuo Qing was this type of person.

“Zhuo Qing, please come in.”

It seemed Zhuo Donglai knew Zhuo Qing would be nearby, and that a soft call would summon him.

Zhuo Qing didn’t disappoint him. He never disappointed anyone.

From the time that he was very young, he never disappointed anyone. And yet today, he seemed to be somewhat tired. He was still wore the same clothes he had worn yesterday, and his shoes were caked with mud.

He usually was not like this.

Usually, no matter how busy he was, he would take the time to neaten up his appearance. He knew that Zhuo Donglai and Sima Chaoqun were very particular about those types of things.

Thankfully, Zhuo Donglai wasn't paying attention to his appearance today, and simply ordered, "Kneel down and kowtow to Uncle Sima."

Zhuo Qing kneeled, and Sima Chaoqun did nothing to stop him. His eyes were fixed on Zhuo Donglai.

"There's no need for you to have him kowtow," said Sima. "I know he's your adopted child. You have no son, and you want him to carry on the name of the house of Zhuo. If you die, I'll take care of him." He couldn't help but look at his own sons, and his eyes filled with sorrow and fury. "At the very least, I won't take care of him the way you took care of my sons."

"I believe you," said Zhuo Donglai. "I truly believe you." He watched Zhuo Qing finish kowtowing and stand up. Then he said, "You heard what Uncle Sima said. You should know that he never goes back on his word. He will take care you better than me."

"I know." Zhuo Qing's voice was hoarse with gratitude. "But, I will never again take another surname."

"Remember, if I die, you must treat Uncle Sima as if he were me." Zhuo Donglai seemed to be moved by emotion. "No matter what happens between Uncle Sima and I, you must not allow resentment into your heart, and you must never tell anyone what you saw today."

"I know," said Zhuo Qing sadly. "I will definitely abide by your wishes, even if I die."

Zhuo Donglai let out a long sigh.

"You were always a good child, you definitely have a bright future ahead of you." He looked at Zhuo Qing. "Come here, there's something I want you to have. Whether I live or die, you need to keep it safe."

"Yes."

Zhuo Qing walked over, slowly, his eyes filled with an unspeakable sadness, as if he had foreseen that some tragic and horrible thing would happen.

He did not flee, because he knew that fleeing was pointless.

Sima Chaoqun turned his head, refusing to look at them.

He had made a decision in his heart to never again allow anyone to stir his emotions, and to never allow anything to cause him to change his mind about something.

He then heard a very strange sound, like the sound of leather being pierced.

When he looked back, he saw that Zhuo Donglai had stabbed Zhuo Qing in the heart with his blade.

Zhuo Qing took half a step back and then toppled to the ground.

He didn't cry out.

His pale white face contained no expression of surprise or pain, as if he had long ago known that this would happen.

—It was not that Zhuo Donglai's blade had moved extremely quickly, but rather that he had prepared himself. It was as if when he began to walk forward, he was already completely prepared.

Sima Chaoqun's face twisted in surprise.

"Why did you kill him?" His voice harsh, he said, "Are you afraid I would torment him after your death?"

"No," said Zhuo Donglai. "Your heart has always been much more magnanimous and benevolent than mine. You wouldn't do something like that." His voice was very calm. "I killed him because I couldn't leave him behind for you."

"Why?"

"He was very dangerous. Somber, callous and dangerous. At this young age, I could kill him, but in a few years I think I wouldn't be his match." He slipped off his violet marten coat and gently wrapped up Zhuo Qing's corpse. He looked just like a loving father covering his beloved son with a quilt.

But his voice was completely emotionless.

“He was already beginning to cultivate his power. While I’m alive I could control him, but if I died, he would achieve my position in a few years. And then he would kill you.” His voice was very calm. “If I left someone like this behind for you, I couldn’t die in peace.”

His voice was flat, as flat as if he was talking about squishing a mosquito for the sake of Sima Chaoqun.

It seemed as if he wanted to conceal from Sima Chaoqun that no matter how sinister, vicious and unfeeling he acted toward others, his feelings toward Sima were true.

No one could argue with this.

Sima Chaoqun’s fists were clenched, the blood in his veins boiled.

He knew that he had to control himself, and never again act like he had in the past. He was a flesh and blood person, not a puppet. His wife still hung from the roof. His two lively, cute, intelligent children would never again call him father.

Sima Chaoqun’s body suddenly flew into the air, and he flitted like a swallow over the crossbeams of the roof.

His sword lay on the roof beam.

The sword glittered, and then struck down like lightning.

Part 7

Everyone in Jianghu knew that Sima Chaoqun used a “Thousand Hammers Great Iron Sword.”

The refinement of a thousand hammer blows had forged it.

The power of its descending attack was like the power of a thousand falling hammers, swift and fierce. Ten thousand men together could not defend against it.

Four feet, three inches long, weighing ninety pounds, it had been forged using iron from Sichuan, the best iron collected from throughout the province, which was then thoroughly tempered and forged. (1)

But the sword was really too heavy.

Sword skill uses quick and flexible movements to create unpredictability, and therefore victory. When using a sword like this, many opportunities to injure one's opponent would be lost in the rapid changes in stances.

In a battle between masters, those opportunities would be fleeting, and once lost, impossible to recover. But Sima Chaoqun must use a sword like this. Because he was Sima Chaoqun.

Only he would have a sword like this created, and only he could use it.

Everyone in Jianghu knew, Sima Chaoqun had been born with superhuman strength. He could lift tens of thousands of pounds as if it were nothing.

If he didn't use a sword like this, surely everyone would be disappointed.

And how could the invincible hero Sima Chaoqun let down the heroes of Jianghu?

Ten thousand men could stand as his enemies, but not Zhuo Donglai.

They had fought side by side for so many years, and had been friends regardless of life or death. They weren't enemies.

Whenever Sima Chaoqun won a brilliant victory, it had been because of Zhuo Donglai's planning and scheming behind the scenes.

This was a different situation.

Sima Chaoqun had never fought Zhuo Donglai before, but he knew that he was more powerful than anyone he had faced before in his life. Perhaps even more powerful than he himself.

He knew that many people believed Zhuo Donglai to be weak, but when he knew that he would find himself in a life-and-death battle with him, he had prepared himself to die beneath his blade.

And therefore, this time, he did not use the Thousand Hammers Great Iron Sword. He could not afford to lose even the slightest opportunity to defeat his opponent.

This time, he used a short sword, a blade as short as Zhuo Donglai's, and just as sharp.

The blades they used were just like the two of them, both forged in the same furnace.

The fire in the furnace was the same. It could forge iron into steel, and could make weak people strong.

The same furnace, the same cauldron, the same fire.

Who was burning whom? (3)

Part 8

The sword glittered, slashing downward like lightning.

This was the most powerful move of Sima Chaoqun's renowned "Nine Thunderbolts Forms," the fierce "Great Thunderbolt." Who knew how many masters of Jianghu had been defeated by this sword form?

He wasn't using his Great Iron Sword, and as such the descending attack lacked some of its power. But the sword was extremely sharp, and the speed and flexibility of attack variations made up for the lack of power.

However, Sima really should not have used this attack.

This attack utilizes strength to defeat weakness. It should be used when it has been calculated that the opponent's heart has weakened, and their power depleted. Not when facing a formidable foe.

This attack was a complete release of power. If the blow did not land, one's opponent would definitely be able to counterattack effectively.

There was no margin for error.

Why would Sima use such an attack against Zhuo Donglai? Did he underestimate him? Was he too confident?

When masters face off it is unforgivable to either underestimate one's opponent or overestimate one's own ability.

Sima Chaoqun should understand this.

No, he would not underestimate Zhuo Donglai, nor overestimate himself. He was someone who rarely made mistakes.

The reason he used this attack was because he understood Zhuo Donglai very well.

Zhuo Donglai was extremely cautious. Regardless of the circumstances, if he was not completely certain of victory, he wouldn't make a move. When he did make a move, he would use a stance that was absolutely safe.

He would only make his move if he was certain that there was not even the slightest chance he would be harmed in doing so.

The unbeatable hero Sima Chaoqun was his creation. He had seen with his own eyes countless masters slaughtered with this move.

Seeing Sima Chaoqun and his "Great Thunderbolt" sword form together undoubtedly filled his heart with anxiety.

This was his weakness.

And his weakness was Sima Chaoqun's opportunity.

Sima Chaoqun must take advantage of this opportunity. When Zhuo Donglai felt anxiety, he would hesitate, flinch, and the sword could penetrate his heart.

When masters face off, life and death, victory and defeat, are usually decided by one stance.

Because masters calculate all factors before attacking with their stance.

—The weather, the terrain, the opponent's mood and strength, all will be considered in the calculation.

But everyone makes mistakes. The slightest miscalculation will lead to mistakes that will be regretted for a lifetime.

Part 9

The sword glittered, descending like lightning.

Zhuo Donglai did not hesitate, did not flinch. The lightning-like sword aura did not mesmerize him.

He had already located the tip of the sword within the flickering gleam.

The tip of the sword: the heart of the sword.

The power and variation of a sword's attack follows its tip, and those variations are the sword's life force.

He struck at the life force of the sword with his blade.

The glittering, heaven-encompassing sword aura suddenly vanished. Zhuo Donglai's blade rested on Sima Chaoqun's throat.

Sima had no energy left to evade or counterattack. The blade, which could cut through iron like mud, could also slice off his head in an instant.

He waited for the blade to strike, his eyes open.

His eyes were completely free of any sorrow, hatred or fear.

In an instant, he had become infinitely calmer than he had been just a moment ago. If his attack had succeeded, and Zhuo Donglai was dead, perhaps he would not be this calm.

Zhuo Donglai looked at him coldly, his eyes completely devoid of any emotion.

“You made a mistake,” he said. “And so, you are defeated.”

“Yes. I’m defeated.”

“You’ve always wanted to know which of us would win if we fought, correct?”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t. I never wanted to know.”

Unexpectedly, an indescribable heartbreak filled his voice. And yet, this did not stop the blade in his hand from chopping at Sima Chaoqun’s neck.

The blade glimmered, but no blood splattered.

The blow had struck with the dull back of the blade. With that, he left, not looking back, not even glancing at Sima.

“Why don’t you kill me?” blurted Sima hoarsely.

Zhuo Donglai did not turn his head. He just said, “Because you’re already dead to me.”

**

(1) The term here used to refer to Sichuan is 九府十三周 or nine prefectures, thirteen autonomous prefectures, which was a way to describe Sichuan in ancient times based on how it was split up into administrative districts.

(2) Literally it says he can lift 130,000 pounds as if it were nothing.

(3) The actual Chinese says, “Who is the bean? Who is the beanstalk?” It’s a play on a common saying that comes from a poem by Cao Zhi. The saying basically means “burning beanstalks to cook the beans,” and means that two parties come from the same place, that they shouldn’t hurt each other. Here’s more details: <http://goo.gl/AFBOZh>

CHAPTER 16 – IT'S LONELY AT THE TOP

Part 1

The twenty-fifth of the second month, around the third watch. (1)

Chang'an.

Somewhere in the distance, someone beat a drum to sound out the third watch.

Every night contained a third watch, and the third watch of every night always seemed to carry a sort of desolate and mysterious beauty.

The third watch of every night was the time most likely to stir people's emotions.

Zhuo Donglai sat wrapped in his marten coat, pouring a cup of fine wine in unison with the third watch drum. During this soul-stirring watch, he should be the happiest person in Chang'an.

All his foes were defeated, and he had accomplished everything he needed to accomplish. After today, who could possibly challenge him?

And yet, could anyone tell whether, deep in his heart, he was really as happy as one would imagine?

Zhuo Donglai asked himself the same question.

—If he didn't plan to kill Sima, why had he taken the time to defeat him? Why defeat the heroic idol that he himself had created? Wouldn't he end up just as disappointed as all the other heroes in the world?

He didn't know the answer to these questions.

—If he didn't plan to kill Sima, why not just give in to him? Why not just quietly acquiesce?

Zhuo Donglai didn't know.

He only knew that he could not have attacked with the edge of the blade. He could never allow Sima Chaoqun to die by his hand. Just as he could never kill himself.

In some aspects, he was a part of Sima Chaoqun, and parts of himself had been replaced by Sima.

But he truly believed that even without Sima Chaoqun, he would continue on living, and the Great Protection Agency would continue to exist.

By the time he finished his fourth cup, his spirits had lifted, and he was preparing to have one more drink before lying down to sleep.

As his hand reached out to pour the wine, his heart suddenly dropped and his pupils constricted.

He had suddenly noticed that the box beneath the lamp was gone.

There were guards surrounding the area day and night. No one could easily sneak into this room, and no one knew that this ordinary, old-fashioned box was a fearsome and mysterious weapon.

Who would possibly risk their life to come here to take it?

There was a shattering sound as the crystal drinking vessel in Zhuo Donglai's hand was crushed. He suddenly realized that it was very likely he had made a mistake. He suddenly thought back to Zhuo Qing's expression just before he died.

And then he heard someone knocking on the door.

"Enter."

A strapping young man pushed open the door and entered; tall and broad-shouldered, with large hands, his clothes were well arranged, albeit ordinary, his expression serious and sincere.

The Great Protection Agency was a very large, and strictly organized. Every job, every action, was overseen by someone. But not many received direct orders from Zhuo Donglai, so among the lower ranks, few had the chance to see him face to face.

Zhuo Donglai had never seen this young man before, but he could guess who he was.

“Zheng Cheng.” Zhuo Donglai looked at him calmly. “I understand you have performed many services for Zhuo Qing recently. But you should know that this isn’t a place that anyone can just casually enter.”

“Your disciple knows.” Zheng Cheng was respectful and sincere in his response. “But I couldn’t not come.”

“Why?”

“A month ago, he took me in as one of his direct subordinates and began giving me assignments. When he asks me to do something, I cannot disobey.”

“It was Zhuo Qing who told you to come here?”

“Yes,” said Zheng Cheng. “To speak for him.”

“To speak for him?” said Zhuo Donglai harshly. “Why does he need you to speak for him?”

“Because he is dead.”

“If he wasn’t dead, you wouldn’t come?”

“Correct,” said Zheng Cheng calmly. “If he was still alive, I wouldn’t reveal what he told me even if I were thrown into a vat of boiling oil.”

“You needed to wait until after he died before coming?”

“Correct. His orders were that if he died, I must come to see Mr. Zhuo within two hours, and transmit his words without any omissions.”

Zhuo Donglai looked at him coldly. He had suddenly noticed that Zheng Cheng's attitude and manner of speaking were just like Zhuo Qing's.

"He's dead," said Zheng Cheng, "so your disciple came. I didn't dare not to."

The shattered fragments of the crystal drinking vessel glittered under the lamplight. Each piece seemed to shine like Zhuo Qing's eyes as death approached him.

Zhuo Donglai thought of his attitude before he had died, and after a long time he asked Zheng Cheng, "When did he give you these orders?"

"This evening." (2)

"This evening?" Zhuo Donglai's pupils constricted again. "Of course it was this evening."

At that time, he and Sima Chaoqun had already arrived at the cemetery-like house.

At that time, Zhuo Qing could have found time to wash himself and change clothes.

But, he didn't do things the way he normally did. What he did, he would only reveal to Zhuo Donglai after his death.

Zhuo Donglai stared at Zheng Cheng.

"At that time he knew he was about to die?"

"For the most part. He told me that he most likely would not live past sunrise tomorrow."

"He had a nice life, how could he die?"

"He knew that someone was planning to kill him."

"Who was this person?"

"You." Zheng Cheng looked straight at Zhuo Donglai. "He said it was you."

“Why would I want him dead?”

“Because he had done too many things for you, and knew too much. You wouldn’t leave him for Sima Chaoqun.”

“He could see that you and Sima Chaoqun had reached a breaking point, and regardless of whether it was because of Sima or yourself, you would first send him to his grave.”

“He calculated things so well. Why didn’t he just flee?”

“Because he had no time. He never imagined things would happen so quickly, and it was too late to make another plan. Before you and Sima fought, you would call for him. If you found that he had fled, you would drop everything and pursue him. At his current level of power, he could not escape your control.”

“When the time came, the worst that could happen is that he would die. Why didn’t he try to fight?”

“Because when the time came, Sima’s grief was most likely subsiding, and his determination wavering. It would be even more difficult to avoid death if you and Sima reunited. You know what kind of person he is. He wouldn’t let that happen.”

Zhuo Donglai’s fists clenched into balls. “So he would rather die than allow Sima and I to be reunited?”

“Correct,” said Zheng Cheng. “If the two of you are united, you will succeed. If you are split apart, you will be defeated. He had to seek vengeance for himself, and this was his only opportunity.”

Zhuo Donglai laughed coldly. “He’s already dead, yet he can still seek revenge for himself?”

“Correct. He told me to tell you that you killed him, and he will make you regret it. Before he died, he dug a grave for you. Sooner or later the day will come for you to lie down in it. And he told me to tell you that that day will arrive soon.”

Zhuo Donglai stared at him. One word at a time he said, "But I'm not dead yet. I can kill you in the time it takes to raise a hand. And I can let you die without a proper burial."

"I know."

"Then how can you dare to stand in front of me and speak so rudely?"

"Because these are not my words, they are Zhuo Qing's." Zheng Cheng's facial expression did not change. "He told me what to tell you word for word. If I left anything out, it would be disloyal to you and unfaithful to him." His attitude was very solemn and sincere. "I don't have the qualifications to be a disloyal, unfaithful person."

"Not qualified?" Zhuo Donglai couldn't help but ask. "What qualifications must one have to be disloyal and unfaithful?"

"To be an openly disloyal and unfaithful person, people must hate you, yet treat you with the utmost respect. If you want to be a disloyal and unfaithful person without those qualifications, then you definitely deserve to die without a proper burial."

Zhuo Donglai stared at him for a very long time. And then one word at a time asked, "Am I qualified to be this kind of person?"

Without hesitation, Zheng Cheng responded, "Yes."

Zhuo Donglai suddenly laughed.

He shouldn't have laughed. What Zheng Cheng said was not funny, not even one word of it. Anyone who heard what he said would agree that it was not amusing at all.

And yet he laughed.

"Well said. Very well said." Zhuo Donglai smiled. "If a person is qualified to be unfaithful and disloyal, what in the world could cause worry?"

"Most likely nothing," said Zheng Cheng, sincerely. "If I can reach that level one day in my life, I wouldn't worry about anything."

“Then work hard,” said Zhuo Donglai. “I really hope you achieve your goal.” He laughed. “Zhuo Qing must have calculated that I wouldn’t kill you, because at this time, I need people like you.”

Zheng Cheng looked at him, his eyes filled with respect, the same way that Zhuo Qing had looked at him in the past.

“There’s another person,” said Zheng Cheng. “Someone else who is very likely more useful than me.”

“Who?”

“Gao Jianfei. He has been waiting for you. I’ve asked him to leave, but he just stays. It doesn’t matter how long I say he needs to wait, he won’t leave. He says he has nowhere else to go.”

“Then let him wait,” said Zhuo Donglai coolly. “Although, being forced to wait is not easy. Treat him well. Whatever he wants, give him.”

“Yes.”

Zheng Cheng stepped back slowly. It seemed he was waiting for further questions from Zhuo Donglai.

But Zhuo Donglai had no questions. In fact, he had already closed his eyes, and seemed to have fallen to sleep.

In the lamplight, his face seemed very tired. Pale white, weak, and tired.

And yet, as Zheng Cheng looked at him, his eyes were filled with veneration, a respect and fear that spilled forth from the bottom of his heart.

It was because he was different from others. His viewpoint and reaction to matters were different.

Zheng Cheng left, closing the door behind him. And when the cold wind hit him, he realised that the crotch of his pants was thoroughly soaked.

Part 2

Zhuo Donglai was not like other people.

In situation where others would be heartbroken or furious, he would laugh. In situations where others became amazed and excited, his reaction was extraordinarily cheerless, to the extent that sometimes he had no reaction at all.

He knew Gao Jianfei had arrived, and he awaited him with the fervor of a love-smitten teen awaiting a lover.

He knew that the tear stains on Gao Jianfei's sword could instantly transform into bloodstains, the blood of his enemies.

And yet this seemed to provoke no reaction.

The box on the table was gone, and the box's owner, just settled into the little courtyard, was also likely gone.

Zhuo Qing had set his mind on revenge.

If he had wanted to find the most fearsome possible enemy for Zhuo Donglai, Xiao Leixue was definitely the ideal choice.

Fragrance of the Gentleman was not the type of drug that once used was effective forever.(3) If not continually administered, Xiao Leixue's power would be completely restored in two or three days.

That could possibly be Zhuo Donglai's appointed time to die.

Apart from that, there were many other things Zhuo Qing could have done, things that would create many regrets for Zhuo Donglai.

His accounts, his wealth, his communications, his secrets, all could be used by Zhuo Qing to betray him, along with every disloyal subordinate.

—What tomb had Zhuo Qing excavated for him as he approached death?

If this had been happening to someone else, Zhuo Donglai would have used all his power and methods to investigate the situation.

But right now, he did nothing.

Zhuo Donglai fell asleep. Really fell asleep.

First, he walked into his bedroom and closed the window. In a secret location at the head of his bed was hidden button, which he pushed.

Then, from a dark cabinet in another hidden location, he pulled out a tiny, jewel-encrusted container. From within the container, he extracted a light green pill, which he swallowed. It was a medicine that could help him to sleep peacefully no matter the circumstances.

He was extremely exhausted.

A glorious victory would usually make a person extremely exhausted.

And under the circumstances, the only thing that could help one to restore clear-headedness, was sleep.

The key to life and death, victory and defeat, was usually decided in a fleeting instant of time. When the time came to make decisions like that, one needed to be completely clear-headed.

And so he needed sleep. As far as he was concerned, nothing was more important.

And no one could judge the importance or weightiness of a matter better than Zhuo Donglai.

As he fell asleep, he thought only of one person.

He didn't think of Zhuo Qing, who had died so horribly beneath his blade, nor Xiao Leixue, who might come to claim his life at any time.

He thought about his brother, his brother whose whole life had been death. The brother with whom he had lived in their mother's womb for ten months, with whom he had struggled to receive nutrients and blood.

He had never seen his brother. His brother was only a murky, hazy shadow in his heart.

But in that dim, illusory moment before entering sleep, the blurry shadow suddenly transformed into a person, a person who he could see very clearly.

And it looked like Sima Chaoqun

Part 3

Far away, someone sounded out the night watch on a drum. The third watch had passed.

Such a dull drum beat, dreary and emotionless. Once the third watch has come, one cannot stay behind in the second watch.

Sima Chaoqun clearly recalled having just heard the drum beating, and he remembered that it was the second watch.

He had heard quite clearly.

At that time he was already somewhat drunk. But despite having drunk about 7 or 8 bottles, he was merely tipsy. His head was extremely clear.

He clearly remembered that he had been in a tiny wine shop, drinking. Other than him, there was a big table of customers. They were all young men, 18 or 19 years old, holding four or five women at least twice their age. They were shooting their mouths.

They were praising Sima Chaoqun, saying he was the greatest hero in the world, a rarity under heaven, and how they were friends with him.

They were bragged happily, and their audience listened happily.

There was only one person who wasn't happy, and that was Sima Chaoqun.

And so he drank without regard to his life.

He remembered clearly that as they happily shot their mouths off, he had suddenly stood up and slapped the table. "What is Sima Chaoqun? He's

f*cking nothing! He's not even human. Not worth a copper coin! Not worth a fart!"

The more he cursed, the happier he felt. But the people listening weren't happy. One of them suddenly turned over the table, and they charged over, ten in total. He split one of their noses in two.

These things, Sima Chaoqun remembered clearly, better than a young schoolboy could remember the Thousand Character Classic. (4)

He even remembered that one of the women, her face painted with rouge so badly that she looked like a wild animal, had taken a wooden clog off her foot and smacked him in the head with it.

After that, he didn't remember anything.

At that time, he'd heard the second watch being sounded, and now it was the third watch. (5)

Before, he'd been sitting in a tiny wine shop, drinking. Now he was lying down, in a dark, treeless, windless, moonless alley. His head seemed eight times heavier than normal and his throat was like a kitchen stovepipe. Pain wracked his entire body, like he was a pair of old pants that had been scrubbed over and over again on a washboard.

—Had that fat woman's red-lacquered clog really beat his head?

—How had he arrived to this place?

—What had happened in the past few hours?

Sima Chaoqun couldn't remember.

The past few hours were blank, like a page that had been torn from a book.

Part 4

Sima Chaoqun wanted to struggle to his feet when he realized that another person stood in the dark alley, looking at him strangely.

“Are you really the matchless Sima Chaoqun? How did you end up like this?”

Sima Chaoqun decided to ignore him, to pretend that he hadn’t even seen him. But the man seemed insistent on being seen. He walked forward and lifted Sima up by the arm.

Moments before, he had been unable to rise, no matter how much effort he expended. But now he rose easily, and stood straight.

The man did not seem willing to release him. Compassion and sadness filled his eyes. “Boss, you’re drunk. Let me give you a hand.” He continued, “I’m Ah Gen, boss, don’t tell me you don’t remember me?”

“Ah Gen.” The name seemed familiar.

Only people who had accompanied him in the early days would call him “boss.”

Sima suddenly slapped the man on the shoulder, gripped his arm firmly and laughed.

“Good fellow, where have you been hiding all these years? Did you get married? Did you get divorced?”

Ah Gen also laughed, and it seemed as if hot tears were about to seep from his eyes.

“I never imagined you would remember me, boss, the old gambling addict that I am. And yet you do, as useless as I am.”

“If you’re a gambling addict, then we two are equally useless.” He pulled on Ah Gen and said, “Come, let’s go find a place to drink.”

“Boss, you can’t drink any more. If you hadn’t finished that last half jug of wine just now, how could those little bastards have hurt even a hair of yours?” His voice was filled with sorrow. “Boss, if you hadn’t drunk so much

that your body was weakened, how could those little bastards have beaten you this way? How could that fat bitch have knocked a hole in your head with her clog? Those brats would normally piss themselves in fear just hearing your name.”

“So I really just got beaten up?”

Sima was really doubtful, but after he rubbed his head and ribs, he had no choice but to believe.

“It looks like I really did get beaten up.” He suddenly laughed heartily. “Good. A good beating makes me happy. I never imagined that getting beat up was such a happy thing. I haven’t been this happy in years.”

“But boss didn’t let them take advantage. You also gave those little bastards a good beating, sent them scurrying off like stray dogs.”

“That’s not good.” Sima let out a sigh. “They didn’t deserve to be beaten by me.”

“Why?”

“Do you know why they beat me up?” Sima said. “Because I took the great hero of their heart, Sima Chaoqun, and rained down curses on him, said he isn’t worth a copper coin.” He laughed again. “Sima Chaoqun got beaten up because he cursed himself. If the heroes of the world found out, those little bastards would laugh until their teeth fell out.”

Ah Gen didn’t laugh. He just muttered, “If Mr. Zhuo was here, the boss wouldn’t get drunk.” He suddenly lowered his voice, talking half to himself. “Mr. Zhuo, why couldn’t you be with the boss this time?”

“Why would he be with me?” Sima laughed and laughed. “He’s him, I’m me. He’s a great hero, and I’m just a coward. The fact that he hasn’t chopped my head off to use as a chamber pot is really an honor.”

Ah Gen looked at him, shocked. A long time passed, and then he haltingly asked, “Don’t tell me Mr. Zhuo has rebelled?”

“He’s rebelled. Rebelled against what?” Sima was still laughing. “The Great Protection Agency has always been his. What the hell am I?”

Ah Gen looked at him, tears finally flowing from his eyes. He suddenly knelt down. He smacked his head on the ground three times as he kowtowed. "Ah Gen deserves to die. Ah Gen has let down the boss."

"You didn't let me down. There's only one person under heaven who has let me down, and that's myself."

"But there is something that the boss doesn't know. I would rather be beaten to death than let it go unsaid"

"Say it!"

"I haven't been by the boss's side all these years because Mr. Zhuo sent me to Luo Yang to go undercover in the Lion Clan. And I couldn't tell you. Mr. Zhuo knows that the boss has always been an open and aboveboard person. He didn't want the boss to know about what was happening."

"And I didn't want to know." Sima Chaoqun let out a long sigh. "Zhu Meng, the little bastard, must have no idea how many of his subordinates were sent by Zhuo Donglai. He's pretty much the same as me, a one-hundred-percent bastard."

Ah Gen stared at him for a long time, his eyes filled with a strange, flickering light. "Does the boss want to meet that bastard?"

Sima's eyes also gleamed. "Which bastard are you talking about?" He raised his voice and asked, "The bastard who's like me, Zhu Meng?"

"Yes."

"You know where he is? How do you know where he is?" He stared at Ah Gen. "Don't tell me you're one of the eighty-six men who came with him here to die?"

Ah Gen knelt again. "Ah Gen deserves to die. I let down the boss. But Zhu Meng is like the boss, a courageous and upright hero, who believes in righteousness. I can't betray him at a time like this. So, I came to Chang'an with him, prepared to accompany him in death."

He kowtowed again, his face dripping with blood. "Ah Gen deserves to die. Even though I've betrayed the Great Protection Agency, in my heart I've

never felt any ill will toward the boss. If I did, then I will become a farm animal after I die.”

Sima seemed stupefied upon hearing what he said. And yet, he suddenly laughed. “Good. Very good, Zhu Meng. You got the people Zhuo Donglai sent to spy on you to follow you through hell and high water. You really are a true man.” Laughing heartily, he said, “Cleats and Ah Gen are also true men. Compared you, Sima Chaoqun doesn’t even count as a dog’s fart.”

His laughter was hoarse and sorrowful, and yet, he did not shed a tear.

Not a single tear.

Part 5

Zhu Meng also shed no tears.

When he had watched Cleats killed in battle, when he had held him in his arms, he’d shed no tears.

He’d shed blood.

Even though it had flowed from his eyes, what had flowed out had been blood.

Die Wu still bled constantly. No one in the world could stop her blood from flowing.

Because what flowed from her wounds was no longer blood, but the soul of a dancer.

And the soul of the dancer had already transformed into a butterfly.

—Who had ever seen a butterfly shed blood? Who knew the color of the blood of a butterfly?

Shedding blood. Why must people shed blood, and how is it that they never know how repulsive it is? The butterfly knows.

Because her life is beautiful, temporary, and she does not allow people to see the ugly side of her.

“Help me cover myself with the quilt. Cover my legs. Don’t let anyone see my legs.”

This was what Die Wu had said, four times, before she slipped into unconsciousness.

Actually, she had no legs.

It was because she had no legs that she would not allow anyone to see. If anyone had the heart to say that this was some type of irony, then it was a fundamental weakness of humanity, and that person’s heart must have been transformed by evil spirits into iron and stone. The thick, heavy quilt covered Die Wu’s body, just like a layer of thick, dark clouds will cover the sun before a rainstorm.

Die Wu’s face completely lacked any lustre or color, just like the small bowl of lamp-oil on the wooden table in the small room, which would soon grow dark.

Zhu Meng sat in the lamplight watching over her. He didn’t move and didn’t speak. He neither drank a drop, nor shed a tear.

The little room was dark and damp and cold.

Thirteen men remained of his subordinates, and they seemed to watch over him the same way he watched over Die Wu. Their hearts were as grieved and hopeless as his. And yet they still lived.

—Why had Ah Gen not returned after being sent out to collect information and buy food? And then he returned. And Sima Chaoqun was with him.

They saw him return with someone, a tall stranger. His hair, coiled into a bun, was in disarray, his clothing ripped and torn, his body covered with wounds, without a weapon in his hands.

But regardless, at this time, Ah Gen should not have brought a stranger to this place.

Because even though this down and out stranger seemed like nothing more than a chased beast with nowhere to go, beasts are beasts, filled with danger, just as capable of hurting people.

Even though he carried no weapon, he did have an imposing manner which seemed sharper than any blade.

Every person in the room gripped a broadsword in hand, a broadsword they had vowed never to part with until the moment of death.

Each sword was moments away from being unsheathed.

Only Zhu Meng sat there unmoving. And then he suddenly gave an order that his subordinates had trouble comprehending.

“Light the lamps and candles. Stoke the fire.” His order was direct and simple, but very strange. “Light anything that can be lit.”

No one understood what Zhu Meng meant, but Sima Chaoqun understood.

He had never seen Zhu Meng before.

But as soon as he had entered this shabby, dark, damp little room, as soon as he caught sight of Zhu Meng sitting there next to the bed like a rock eroded by the wind, he knew he had caught sight of the person he most wanted to see.

The little room originally had only one small, dim lamp.

Shining lamplight should be joyous, but in tragic circumstances like these, brighter light is useless.

And yet Zhu Meng, his voice deep and horse, ordered, “Light all the candles and lamps and torches. Let me lay eyes on our honored guest.”

The lamplight flared. When Zhu Meng spoke, his orders were usually followed.

A small lamp, seven candles, and five torches were enough to light the small room as if it were day, enough to illuminate the face of every person present. Every scar and wrinkle could be seen clearly.

Sorrow and mourning, hatred and fury, all give birth to wrinkles, wrinkles deeper than the wounds inflicted by sharp swords.

Zhu Meng slowly stood up and turned around, at long last faced off against Sima Chaoqun.

The two men looked at each other quietly, appraising each other. It seemed as if the only sound left under heaven was the sound of the flickering flames.

It seemed as if the only people left under heaven were these two men.

Two men, their bodies covered with scars, their hearts filled with sadness. Two men in dire straights, completely and utterly defeated. Only they existed.

As they stood there facing each other, it seemed as if no one else existed.

“You’re Sima Chaoqun?”

“Does it look like I am?”

“It doesn’t look like it. The invincible Sima Chaoqun really shouldn’t look like this. But, I know you are Sima Chaoqun. You definitely are.”

“Why?”

“Because other than Sima Chaoqun, no one else under heaven has this appearance. And yet you look like a person who has just seen eight-hundred and eighty-eight vengeful ghosts.”

Sima agreed. “Not many people besides me are able to see eight-hundred and eighty-eight vengeful ghosts. But one other does exist.”

“Other than you?” asked Zhu Meng. “Someone surnamed Zhu? Zhu Meng?”

“It seems so.”

Zhu Meng laughed heartily.

He really laughed, the way he usually laughed when he heard something like this, a laughter that could be heard by anyone within in ten miles.

He laughed, and yet his face contained no trace of laughter. And it seemed as if the men standing around him couldn't hear him laughing.

Because there was actually no trace of true laughter.

There was no laughter, no weeping. The others could neither laugh nor weep.

And yet their eyes filled with hot tears.

They were not Zhu Meng, they were not Sima Chaoqun, and so they could shed tears.

They could shed blood and they could shed tears.

But the only thing they had left were tears of blood.

Zhu Meng looked at these men, good men who would die before leaving his side, and it seemed his own bloodshot eyes would soon spill forth with blood.

"This time we were defeated. Thoroughly defeated." His voice was hoarse. "But we don't surrender to defeat, and don't surrender to death."

"I know," said Sima Chaoqun sadly. "I know everything that happened."

"But when we arrived, you weren't in Chang'an."

"Correct. I wasn't here." Sima Chaoqun sighed. "I didn't realize you would arrive so quickly."

"So you went alone to Luoyang?"

"I wanted to go alone to see you, to resolve the issues between us. Resolve things, just you and me."

"You really wanted that?"

"Yes, really."

Zhu Meng suddenly let out a long sigh. "I didn't misjudge you. I knew that if you were in Chang'an, you would at least give us a chance, an honorable fight to the death." His voice was filled with grief and indignation. "We came here to die, but for us to die in such a despicable, cunning plot, we can not accept death in this way."

"I understand."

"I don't blame you. If you were in Chang'an, this type of contemptible, shameless thing would not have happened."

"You're wrong," said Sima Chaoqun solemnly. "And regardless of whether or not I was here, it was my responsibility."

"Why?"

"Because at that time I was the ultimate head of the Great Protection Agency, and I maintain ultimate responsibility. Injustice has a source, debt has a debtor. This debt must be repaid by me."

"You came today to repay the debt?"

"Yes."

"Can you repay the debt fully?" asked Zhu Meng, his tone harsh. "How can you?"

"Even if I can't repay it fully, I must try," said Sima Chaoqun. "How do you want me to repay? However you want me to repay it, I will, otherwise, there was no point in coming."

Zhu Meng stared at him, and he stared at Zhu Meng. The strange thing was, no hatred or animosity existed in their eyes. Instead, they were filled with respect and veneration.

"You said 'at that time you' were the ultimate head of the Great Protection Agency," said Zhu Meng suddenly. "What about now?"

“It doesn’t matter now what type of position I have, I still bear complete responsibility.”

“Why?”

“Because you are still Zhu Meng, and I am still Sima Chaoqun.”

The others could see that within the eyes of this completely defeated man shone forth an unencroachable dignity. “Today, I must repay the debt, because you are Zhu Meng and I am Sima Chaoqun. No matter the circumstances, this cannot change. Even if my head is removed and my blood is spilled, even if my family is destroyed and my people are dead. It cannot change.”

—It really was this way.

—A head can be removed, and blood spilled, but the spirit will never yield, and can never be destroyed.

This was the spirit of personal loyalty of the men of Jianghu, the courage and uprightness of Jianghu.

Zhu Meng stared at Sima Chaoqun, his eyes also filled with unencroachable dignity.

“You are my mortal enemy. The hatred between us is deep; who knows how many people have died because of it? How can we coexist with the vengeful ghosts of those driven to their deaths?”

“I understand.”

“I, Zhu Meng, have roamed Jianghu my whole life. I kill with a wave of my sword, and revel in exacting vengeance. I’ve never really taken notice of anyone. Except for you, Sima Chaoqun.” His voice trembled with agitation. “Today, please accept my obeisance.”

Then he really did pay obeisance, this man who bowed to no man. He suddenly dropped to the ground and prostrated himself before Sima Chaoqun.

Sima Chaoqun also dropped to the ground and bowed to Zhu Meng.

"I pay homage to you, a true hero, a true man," said Zhu Meng hoarsely. "But after this, you and I must be separated by death." One word at a time, he said, "Because I must still kill you. I have no other choice."

Sima Chaoqun solemnly responded: "Yes. This is what life is like for people in Jianghu. We have no other option."

"It's good that you understand." Zhu Meng's voice grew more hoarse. "It's good you understand."

He stood, and once again looked over his subordinates.

"This is Sima Chaoqun, the man who destroyed the Lion Clan." Zhu Meng's voice was deep and he spoke very slowly. "Because of his desire to achieve unprecedented hegemony, who knows how many of our brothers died tragically on the street, their bones unable to be properly buried? Who knows how many of our sisters became widows, and were forced into prostitution just to eat?"

Everyone listened quietly, their tear-filled eyes streaked with lines of blood, the veins on their forehead bulging.

"Every one of us vowed an oath in our hearts to never return to our home unless it was with his head. Even if we all die, we shall become evil spirits that haunt his soul."

He pointed at Sima Chaoqun. "Now he's here. You heard clearly everything he said. He came to repay his debt. A debt of blood must be repaid with blood."

His blade-like eyes swept over his subordinates. "He's alone, just like us, deserted and isolated, with no loved ones. But we have ourselves, brothers, and we must have vengeance. Now is the best opportunity. He can't stand up to all of us by himself." His voice grew in intensity. "You all have blades in hand. You can draw them and hack his head off right here."

No one drew their blade.

They stood listening quietly, not willing to even look at Sima Chaoqun.

“Why don’t you do something?” Zhu Meng shouted. “Have your hands grown weak? Have you forgotten how to kill?”

Ah Gen suddenly stepped forward, and then prostrated himself before Sima Chaoqun and Zhu Meng.

“Boss, I know you came here with me because you were ready to die,” he said. “You have lived a worthy life, you can die without regrets. After you have died, I will arrange all your affairs, and then I will join you.”

Sima Chaoqun laughed heartily. “Good. You’re a good brother.” He laughed. “Well said. A worthy life. Die without regrets.”

Suddenly, there was a clanging sound as a blade dropped from someone’s hand onto the floor.

Zhu Meng looked at the person, and asked harshly, “Man Niu, you’ve always been a good man, never afraid to kill. How come you can’t keep ahold of your blade?”

Man Niu hung his head, his face covered with tears of blood.

“Clan Leader, you know that I’ve dreamed of cutting his head off. But now...”

“But now what?” Zhu Meng’s voice was even more shrill. “Don’t tell me you don’t want to kill him now?”

“I do, but if you ask me to kill him in this way, there’s no way that I can do it.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know why.” Man Niu knelt, and slapped himself in the face with his sword. “I should die. I’m a coward who deserves to die. I know in my heart, but if the Clan Leader asks me to say it, I couldn’t.”

“You’re a coward, so you can’t say it, but I can say it,” said Zhu Meng. “You can’t do it because you suddenly realize that the man we have wanted to kill for so long is a true man. He’s brave enough to come alone to meet us, and therefore we should treat him like a true man. If we killed him like this, even if it’s for revenge, then we could never have the face to stand in front

of the other heroes of the world.” He asked Man Niu, “Is that what you’re thinking in your heart?”

Man Niu banged his forehead against the ground, his face obscured by the tears of blood.

Zhu Meng’s knife-like gaze swept over his men. “And the rest of you?” he asked them, this group of men who had followed him through countless battles, who had narrowly escaped death with him, and who had nothing left except their lives. “How do you feel in your hearts?”

No one responded.

But the hands that gripped blades were wounded.

Even though they had already lost everything, they hadn’t lost their spirit of uprightness, loyalty and courage.

Zhu Meng looked at them, one by one, and his exhausted, expressionless eyes once again lit up. He lifted his head and said, “Good. These are true brothers. These are truly Zhu Meng’s brothers. Having befriended brothers like this, I can die without any feeling of bitterness.” He turned to Sima Chaoqun. “Do you see? Do you see what kind of brothers Zhu Meng has? Are any of them cowards?”

Sima Chaoqun’s eyes were red, had long since grown red.

But he shed no tears.

He stood there as straight as a spear. After a long time, he said, one word at a time, “Zhu Meng, I can’t compare with you. I’m not even good enough to wipe your ass. Because,” he said, “I don’t have brothers like these.”

It wasn’t spoken by some other person, it was spoken by Sima Chaoqun.

The matchless hero Sima Chaoqun.

Zhu Meng’s eyes contained no hint of self-satisfaction, but instead were filled with sadness, as if he were asking himself: —Why are we enemies and not friends?

He didn't say it, though. Instead, he said, "No matter what, if you treat us well, we will not treat you poorly. But there's one thing that can't change." His fists clenched. "I'm still Zhu Meng, and you are still Sima Chaoqun. And therefore, I must still kill you."

This was a type of honour, just like an eternally unchanging love. The sea can dry up, rocks can wither away, but this type of honor will exist forever.

Because of this type of honor, men in Jianghu with nothing, without even roots or history, can still live forever in the hearts of those who value courage and uprightness.

"As you just said," continued Zhu Meng, "this is a matter between the two of us. We should resolve it ourselves. Has the time come?"

"Yes."

Zhu Meng stared at him for a long time, and then suddenly said, "Give the great hero Sima a blade."

Man Niu immediately grabbed his sword and carried it over with two hands. It was a steel broadsword, forged by a hundred hammer blows, its edge already nicked in several places.

"This isn't a very good blade," said Zhu Meng, "but in Sima Chaoqun's hands, any blade can kill."

"Yes." Sima Chaoqun gently caressed the weak spots on the blade. "This blade is made to be a killing blade."

"Therefore, you have to promise me something."

"Promise what?"

"If you have a chance to kill me, you must not under any circumstances show mercy." Zhu Meng's voice once again became sad. "Otherwise, if I then kill you, I may regret it for the rest of my life. Do you want me to hold regret in my heart for the rest of my life?"

Sima Chaoqun's response was very understanding. "If I'm able to kill you in one move, then you won't see the second move."

“Good,” said Zhu Meng. “Extremely good.”

Zhu Meng’s blade gleamed as he unsheathed it.

Everyone else in the room stepped back. They were Zhu Meng’s brothers, through thick and thin.

But they all stepped back.

Since ancient times, people have been unable to avoid death. What was extraordinary about death?

But the dignity and loyalty of true men was something incapable of being tarnished.

Holding his sword horizontally, Zhu Meng asked, “If I die beneath your blade, my brothers won’t come after you. Zhu Meng can die under the blade of Sima Chaoqun with no regrets.”

And yet, he could not help but turn his head and glance back at Die Wu. It could be the last time he would ever lay eyes on her.

—I’m willing to die beneath your blade. I just hope that you will be able to take care of her for me.

He didn’t say these words. Instead, he said, “If you die beneath my blade, I will definitely take care of your wife and children.”

“My wife and children?” Sima Chaoqun smiled sadly. “I’m afraid my wife and children are waiting for me to die beneath your blade so that I can take care of them.”

Zhu Meng’s heart sank.

At this moment he realized that perhaps Sima’s sorrow and pain was much heavier and much deeper than his own.

But he had already unsheathed his blade. The blade’s course was set.

His heart’s course was set.

Life and death would be decided in a fleeting moment. Sadly, there was nothing in the world that could prevent this battle to the death.

And yet at this exact moment, at this fleeting moment—

“Zhu Meng.”

He suddenly heard someone call out. The voice seemed to come from far away, from very far away.

But the person calling for him was at his side, a woman who could at any time ask him to die for her, and he would.

A person who could not be forgotten even in dreams.

The departed have gone, but the emotions remain
Dance for the king, transform into a butterfly.

Zhu Meng didn't look back.

His blade was in hand. His mortal enemy stood directly in front of the edge of his blade. His brothers were all watching him. He could not turn back. He was duty-bound not to.

“Zhu Meng,” the voice called again. “Zhu Meng.”

Such a distant call, and yet so near.

A call so near, and yet so far, as distant as home is in the dreams of a wanderer.

The home of a wanderer could only be found in the midst of deep, deep pain.

Zhu Meng looked back.

Another clanging sound rang out. Zhu Meng looked back, and as he did, his blade fell. Die Wu was looking at him.

She looking at him alone, and he looked at her.

In this fleeting moment, no one else existed. Nothing else existed.

All the resentment and hatred and fury and sadness had transformed into a butterfly.

And the butterfly was flying away.

Part 6

The butterfly flew away, then flew back. Was it coming? Was it going? Was it a person? Was it a butterfly?

"I'm here, I'm here. I'm always here."

He was there.

The blade was gone, the Lion Clan was gone, the boisterous, insufferably arrogant hero was gone.

But he was still there.

As long as she was there, he would be there.

"Zhu Meng, I made a mistake. You made a mistake, too."

"Yes, I made a mistake."

"Zhu Meng, why could I never understand how you felt about me?" said Die Wu. "Why did you never let me know? Why did you never let me know how much you love me? Why did I never let you know how much I need someone to love me?"

There was no response. Some things don't need a response, because there is no answer.

"Zhu Meng, I'm going to die," said Die Wu, "but you don't need to die. I can die. You cannot."

Her voice was like gossamer strands of fog.

"I can never dance for you again, but I can sing for you," she said. "I'll sing, you listen. I must sing, and you must listen."

"Okay, sing. I will listen."

Nothing.

No people, no resentment, no animosity. Other than the sound of her singing, there was nothing.

And she sang.

"Beautiful hair combed and wrapped into a bun, makeup lightly applied to the face;

Dark blue smoke and purple fog cover the gracefulness, catkins and gossamer strands float by with no set destination;

To never see each other is better than seeing each other, to have no emotions at all is better than having them;

When the singing is over and soberness sets in, the moon shines down on the quiet, empty courtyard."

The gossamer strands gradually drifted further and further away, unceasingly.

She sang, and then she finished singing.

She ceased.

Everything under heaven ceased. At least, in this fleeting moment, everything ceased.

Even tears were not.

Only blood.

Zhu Meng stood there dumbly, looking at her. And then suddenly he vomited up a mouthful of crimson blood.

**

- (1) This means it's around midnight
 - (2) He literally references a time period that describes the period of day between 7 and 9 p.m.
 - (3) It is literally a "knockout drug" or drug that overpowers you.
 - (4) This is a classic text used by schoolchildren. <http://goo.gl/I0Nzg>
 - (5) This means that about three hours have passed, since each watch period lasted three hours
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CHAPTER 14 – THE COLD AURA OF A SWORD

Part 1

The second month, the twenty-sixth.

Chang'an.

Gao Jianfei waited.

Zheng Cheng told him, "Mr. Zhuo can't see you at the moment, but he said that you can wait here."

Little Gao laughed, his smile gentle and calm. "I can wait. I guarantee you, you've never seen someone who can wait like me."

"Oh?"

"I'm more patient than anyone, maybe even more patient than an eighty-year-old man. I used to live in the deep mountains, and once, I waited to see a camellia bloom. Can you guess how long I waited?"

"How long?"

"No less than three days."

"Then you picked the flower and pinned it onto your coat?"

"No," said Little Gao. "Once it bloomed, I just left."

"You waited three days just to watch the few seconds of a flower blooming?" Zheng Cheng was also a patient person, so he understood Little Gao's deeper meaning. "No matter what you are waiting for, you have a reason for waiting. Even though you didn't pick the flower, you still achieved your purpose. And it wasn't simply to watch the camellia bloom."

“What other purpose would I have?”

“A flower is also a life, and the instant that it bloomed, it was the birth of a life. When a life is born into the world, it is profound and miraculous. Nothing in the world can compare to it.”

He stared at Little Gao “I think that the three days you spent were not wasted. After your observation concluded, your sword technique would have improved significantly.”

Little Gao looked at him, surprised. This ordinary, square-jawed young man was much more intelligent than he appeared.

“It’s even more important to have a purpose when waiting for people. You surely won’t wait for Mr. Zhuo to arrive and then just leave.” Zheng Cheng calmly asked, “What is your purpose this time?” He didn’t let Little Gao respond. “There’s no need to answer the question. I don’t want to know.”

“You asked me. Why don’t you want an answer? Why don’t you want to know?”

“Because the less one knows, the better.”

“If you didn’t want to know, then why did you ask?”

“I just wanted to give you a reminder: if I say something like this, then Mr. Zhuo is also thinking it. And when he asks you the question, you’d better have a good response, a reason that will satisfy him. Otherwise, it would be better not to wait for him.” He was very solemn and sincere. “There are not many people alive who have left Mr. Zhuo unsatisfied.”

When he finished speaking, he began to leave. He didn’t want to see Little Gao’s reaction to his statement.

But when he reached the door, he looked back. “There’s something else I forgot to tell you.”

“What’s that?”

“Mr. Zhuo instructed me to give you anything you want, regardless of what it is.”

“He really said that?”

“Yes.”

Little Gao laughed. His laugh was extremely joyful. “That’s wonderful. Extremely wonderful.”

Part 2

When Zhuo Donglai called Zheng Cheng in, it was already almost noon.

Zheng Cheng couldn’t see anything different about him. It was as if all the tragic and fearsome things that had happened yesterday had nothing to do with him. What had Zhuo Qing done to exact revenge? He didn’t mention or ask about it at all.

He just asked Zheng Cheng, “Is Gao Jianfei still waiting?”

“Yes. He’s still waiting,” said Zheng Cheng. “But his request was impossible to completely fulfil.”

“What was his request?”

“He wanted me to in two hours time arrange for twenty tables of the finest food and drink, all prepared by cooks from Chang’an Restaurant and Brilliant Lake Spring restaurant. He also wanted me to in two hours time find all the finest professional working girls in Chang’an to drink with him.”

“How many did you get?”

“I found 72, at least half of which were already in bed with a man and had to be pulled out.”

Zhuo Donglai laughed. “At that hour, any girl who isn’t in bed with a man surely isn’t a professional. You did well. It must have been quite a lively morning here.”

“Extremely lively. All the Agency brothers who can drink ended up joining him. He wanted everyone to celebrate with him.”

“Celebrate? Celebrate what?” asked Zhuo Donglai. “What is it about today that he thinks is worth celebrating?”

“He didn’t say. But I’ve always said, many people act like this when they think they will die soon.”

Zhuo Donglai thought for a moment, and his pupils suddenly began to constrict. After a very long time he said, “Unfortunately, I happen to know that for the moment, there is no way that he will die.”

Part 3

The wine had been drunk, the guests departed. In the courtyard and the hall were a few broken hairpins and discarded necklaces, some belts and gauze stockings along with broken snuff bottles and rouge boxes as well as some other unidentifiable objects. It seemed as if they had all been especially placed so that the host would know that everyone was thoroughly drunk.

And the host?

If the host wasn’t drunk, how could the guests truly enjoy themselves?

Little Gao looked like he was dead, laying face down on a long table. But when Zhuo Donglai arrived, the dead person awoke, and let out a long sigh.

“Why do you always wait until everyone is gone before you show up? Do you really hate seeing people enjoy themselves?”

Zhuo Donglai looked at him coldly. “I definitely don’t like it. There’s nothing amusing at all about waking up and seeing drunk people.”

He stared at Little Gao. “Thankfully, you’re not drunk. The others are drunk, but not you.”

Little Gao's eyes held not the slightest fraction of intoxication.

"I can see you are quite sober," said Zhuo Donglai. "More sober than a rabbit in spring."

Little Gao laughed, a hearty laugh. "You're not mistaken. Not mistaken at all." Laughing, he said, "Your eyes are sharper than the eyes of a fox in autumn."

"You get others drunk. Why aren't you drunk?"

"Because I knew the fox would be coming sooner or later. When a fox is coming, the rabbit needs to stay sober."

"If a fox arrives, it won't help the rabbit to be sober."

"Oh?"

"If a rabbit knows a fox is coming, the best thing to do is run away as fast as possible." Zhuo Donglai laughed. "Unless, of course, the rabbit isn't afraid of the fox!"

"How could a rabbit not be afraid of a fox?"

"Because behind the rabbit is a spear, a spear pointed at the fox's heart. The spear could pierce the fox's heart at any time."

"Spear?" Little Gao blinked. "Where is a spear?"

Zhuo Donglai laughed. "Obviously it comes from within a solitary box. A solitary box, once lost, but then found again."

Little Gao laughed. He did not blink again, and in fact a look of heartfelt admiration filled his eyes.

"You found out?" he asked Zhuo Donglai. "How did you find out?"

"What do you think I found out? I just know that there is a type of person in the world, who, when they lose to someone, will find a way to repay the debt tenfold. I know that Xiao Leixue just so happens to be that type of

person, and he just so happens to have found you already.” He laughed. “I know this little bit.”

Little Gao looked at him for a long time, and then sighed. “That’s not just a little bit, that’s a lot. No wonder Xiao Leixue told me that doing business with Mr. Zhuo is not fun. Often there are things you don’t need to say, because he knows already.”

Zhuo Donglai’s smile was beginning to seem forced. “Unfortunately, I don’t know how much I actually know.”

“Do you know that I was sent here by Xiao Leixue?” Little Gao answered the question himself. “Of course you know. And you most certainly know that what he sent me here to discuss isn’t something good.”

“There are many types of bad things. What type did he send you here to discuss?”

“The worst type, basically.” Little Gao sighed again. “If it weren’t for the fact that I owe him a favor, I wouldn’t have been willing to come talk with you about it at all.”

“Wrong!” Zhuo Donglai smiled again. “In this point, you are wrong.”

“What point?”

“In some aspects, the best types of things turn out to be the worst. And in some ways, the worst types of things turn out to be the best. In the world of men, many situations are like this.” He continued to explain, “If Mr. Xiao had decided not to send someone to talk with me, but instead decided to come in the middle of the night when no one is around, and bring along his box... Well, that would be the worst type of thing.”

“So no matter what it is he sent me here to talk with you about, you won’t be too upset?”

“I won’t.”

“Well, that’s excellent.”

And yet, Little Gao's expression became very solemn. Imitating Zhuo Donglai's own tone, he said, one word at a time, "He wants me to take over Sima Chaoqun's position. To bear the standard of the Great Protection Agency, and to be its ultimate leader."

Anyone would expect Zhuo Donglai to leap up upon hearing this.

But he didn't even blink. He just coolly asked Little Gao: "That's what Xiao Leixue wants?"

"Yes." And then Little Gao asked, "What do you think?"

Zhuo Donglai didn't even take a moment to consider. He simply responded with two words. "Very good."

"Very good?" Little Gao was shocked. "What do you mean by 'very good?'"

Zhuo Donglai smiled, and then bowed toward Little Gao.

"Very good means that your excellency has already become the head of the Great Protection Agency. You hold the number one seat."

Little Gao was flabbergasted.

Zhuo Donglai's attitude was already becoming more respectful.

"From today on, the brave leaders of the thirty-six routes are under your command. If anyone does not comply, Zhuo Donglai's blade will be the first to chop them down."

He stared at Little Gao with his dark, grey eyes. "But from today on, you are part of the Great Protection Agency. The Agency follows the course set by the leader. You must be utterly loyal and spare no efforts in your service. The troubles of the Great Protection Agency are your troubles, its enemies are your enemies."

Little Gao finally let out a sigh. "I understand what you mean." He laughed bitterly. "At first I didn't understand why you would agree so quickly. But now I get it."

"It was always this way. Just like the two edges of a treasured sword." Zhuo Donglai's voice was solemn and calm. "If you wish to gain something, you must pay a price." His voice suddenly became hoarse. "I think you know what price Sima Chaoqun paid in the past."

"And you?" asked Little Gao. "What did you pay?"

Zhuo Donglai laughed. "What did I pay? What did I gain?" Pain filled his laughter. "I'm afraid I can't answer that question, because even I don't know."

He was not lying, and his words really were filled with emotion. So much so that even Little Gao had begun to feel sorry for him.

Thankfully, Zhuo Donglai quickly regained his rock-like calm. And then he raised a question sharper than a blade.

"I'm willing to let you lead the Great Protection Agency. And I'm willing to swear my loyalty and my service to you. I believe that we understand each other, and can benefit from this kind of arrangement. But, what about others?"

"Others?"

"The Great Protection agency is comprised of forces on thirty-six routes. To get them to sincerely support your leadership will not be easy. What are you willing to do?"

"What do you think I should do?"

"First you must gain prestige, and then you can have trust. When you have trust, you can command the heroes and make people obey you. For you to assume this position, you of course must first gain prestige."

"Gain prestige? How do I gain prestige?"

"Sima and I have gone our separate ways. He's already disappeared in a rage."

"I know."

"If you know, then I'm quite certain many others know. Before his death, Zhuo Qing would not have forgotten to dispatch people to carry the news."

"As long as it didn't interfere with his revenge, and he had the means, I'm sure he wouldn't forget. I think he could do a lot of things."

"Definitely."

"When you heard that Xiao Leixue sent me to take over leadership of the Great Protection Agency, you had no inclination to oppose. Because you need my help."

Zhuo Donglai didn't deny this point. "Right now, our circumstances are not stable. Mr. Xiao presumably understands the situation well, and so he sent you here." He continued, "Mr. Xiao and I understand each other, and I would never have considered refusing." He looked at Gao Jianfei and said, one word at a time, "To gain prestige in these circumstances, you must use the most effective and direct method."

Little Gao looked at him. After a long time, he asked, one word at a time, "Are you saying I must kill Zhu Meng?"

"Yes."

"This is your requirement?"

"It's not a requirement, it's an inevitability," he said coldly. "Faced with this kind of inevitability, we really have no other choice."

Gao Jianfei suddenly stood up and walked to the window.

Outside, the snow had not yet melted. The weather was clear and sunny, but everything was still covered in white. The sky had become an azure blue. Far in the distance, a white cloud floated past. It came to a stop, and then flew again.

A long time passed. Zhuo Donglai sighed. "I understand. You and Zhu Meng are men of Jianghu. You take promises very seriously, and you don't care about death. You know that living and dying can be determined by the snap of a finger." His words were sincere. "You met by chance, but instantly got along. You will be together until death."

He sighed, a sigh truly filled with emotion. "In the eyes of those 'gentlemen' who don't truly understand friendship, perhaps you don't count as friends. But I understand."

He continued: "So I also understand that to ask you to kill Zhu Meng is truly grievous. Not just for you, or for him, but for everyone."

Little Gao was speechless.

"So I hope that you understand something," said Zhuo Donglai. "If you don't kill Zhu Meng, someone else will. If he doesn't die by your hand, he will die by someone else's."

"Why?"

"When the Qin State lost the support of the people, everyone under heaven vied for power. Sima Chaoqun lost his position in exactly the same circumstances. And therefore, Zhu Meng's head has already become the target of any hero among the 36 routes of the Great Protection Agency who wishes to seize power."

He continued to explain: "Zhu Meng is the hero of a lifetime, and he is the archenemy of the Great Protection Agency. Anyone in the Agency who can take his head will gain enough prestige to assume Sima's place. At the least, there are three people who have a chance."

"And you fear them!"

"What I fear is not them."

"Then why don't you seize the position?"

"Because of you," said Zhuo Donglai. "I don't fear you, but when you add Xiao Leixue into the mix, it is an unstoppable force."

Yet again, he spoke the truth.

"The reason I didn't kill Zhu Meng before was because I wished to leave him for Sima. And the reason I don't kill him now is because I wish to leave him for you. It would be better for him to die by your hand than another's. In any case, he is a dead man."

Little Gao suddenly turned around and stared at him. His eyes were bloodshot, his face colorless.

“The three people you mentioned. Have they already arrived in Chang’an?”

“Most likely.”

“Who are they?”

“A ruthless sword, a deadly spear, and a hidden weapon coated in barkcloth tree poison (1). Each one is qualified to be listed among the 70 most fearsome weapons under heaven.”

“I asked you who they are, not what weapons they use.”

“They are all killers, and they all have informants in Chang’an. They should be able to locate Zhu Meng within three or four hours. That is all you need to know.”

“Why don’t you tell me their names?”

“Because if you heard their names, it would most likely affect your will to fight.”

“Can we find Zhu Meng before they do?”

“You can’t, but I can.”

“Where is he?”

“In my grasp,” said Zhuo Donglai casually. “He’s always been in my grasp.”

Part 4

Evening clouds covered the sky. Mountains and hills stood in the boundless twilight, as did Zhu Meng. He stood before a pile of yellow earth.

It was a freshly heaped pile of yellow earth. No spring grass grew on the grave, and no stone tablet had been erected. Perhaps the person inside the grave had already transformed into a butterfly and flown away.

Perhaps what was buried in the tomb was actually the lost years of a hero, or the tenderness of youth.

But Zhu Meng was still there. And Sima was still there.

And so the tangled web of resentment and hatred was still there. No one could untangle this knot.

Dusk grew deeper.

Zhu Meng stood there mutely. A long time had passed. Those who remained from among his brothers also stood there looking at him mutely. Who knew what he was thinking in his heart? Who knew what they were thinking?

What they did know in their hearts was that if life was like a play, and if his life was a play, then the time had undoubtedly come for the curtain to fall.

Regardless of how tragic and moving the play was, it was time for the curtain to fall.

Die Wu had taken the first step, and they must complete the path.

No matter how arduous, it must be completed, and they only wished to be able to sprinkle their path home with the blood of the enemy.

Zhu Meng finally turned around and faced his brothers, who had been with him through thick and thin. He looked at each one of them with his large, bloodshot eyes. He stared at each face slowly, looking at them as if it might be his last chance to do so.

And then, his voice hoarse, said, "In life, there is no banquet which lasts forever. Even children and parents will eventually part. Right now, we have reached the time to part."

The faces of his brothers twisted, but Zhu Meng pretended not to see.

“So now, I want you all to leave. The best would be to take different roads, no more than two of you per road. I want you to stay alive. If even one of you lives, then the Lion Clan has hope.”

No one left. No one moved.

Zhu Meng jumped forward, shouting hoarsely:

“F*ck your ancestors! Didn’t you hear what I said? Do you want every last person in the Lion Clan to be wiped out and exterminated?”

Still, no one moved. No one said anything.

Zhu Meng forcefully ripped the belt off his waist, a leather strap as wide as a hand. He charged toward them.

“If you don’t want to leave, if you want to die, then fine, I’ll beat you to death right here so that I don’t get pissed off!”

The belt descended, leaving a strip of purple, a strip of blood.

But these men, who disregarded life and death, pain and suffering, only closed their mouths, gritted their teeth, and remained motionless.

Sima Chaoqun stood at a distance, watching. It seemed as if he had no feelings whatsoever regarding what was happening.

And yet, fresh blood oozed from the corner of his mouth.

He was grinding his teeth too hard, and had bitten himself.

The wind blew. It was unclear when the wind had sprung up, but it gusted against their bodies, cold, cutting like small knives.

Zhu Meng finally dropped to the ground.

“Fine. If you wish to stay behind to die with me, then I’ll let you stay. But,” he said harshly, “you must not forget, whether it is me or Sima Chaoqun who prevails in this battle, it has nothing to do with you. You must not make a move against him.”

Sima Chaoqun suddenly gave a cold laugh. "It's useless. No matter what technique you use to try to stir my emotions, they will all be useless."

"What?" asked Zhu Meng hoarsely. "What are you saying?"

"I just want you to understand that even though my family is gone, it doesn't mean that I will intentionally help you achieve your goals. I won't let you kill me and use my head to revive your prestige, to revive the Lion Clan." Sima Chaoqun's voice was completely hoarse. "If you want to take this head from this neck, you'll need to use real kung fu to do it."

"Your mother's dog farts!" raged Zhu Meng. "Who said anything about asking you to let me off? I still view you as a person, who would have thought that you fart like a dog?" (2)

"Well said. Well cursed." Sima looked up to the heavens and laughed. "If you have the guts, then come on over!"

Zhu Meng was just about to charge forward, but then he suddenly stopped. The thunderbolt-like fury suddenly subsided into calm. He looked at Sima Chaoqun with a very strange expression on his face, as if he had just seen him for the first time.

"You don't dare to approach me?" taunted Sima. "Could it be you only have the guts to attack your brothers? Could it be that 'Fierce Lion' Zhu Meng is nothing more than a coward?"

Zhu Meng suddenly laughed, a wild laugh.

"Well said. Well cursed. Cursed really freaking well." He laughed like a shrieking ape. "Sadly, it's really useless."

"What?" Sima Chaoqun was still laughing coldly. "What are you farting about?"

This time, Zhu Meng was not angry. In fact, he let out a long sigh. "Sima Chaoqun, you are a true man. In my whole life of roaming, I've never admired anyone. Yet now, I have to give you a little admiration. But if you think that Zhu Meng is just a boorish man who doesn't know right from wrong, then you're mistaken. I understand what you're thinking."

“What do you understand?”

“You don’t need to try to provoke me into killing you. And you don’t need to use these methods to try to piss me off. I’m defeated. I’ve lost my soul like an idiot, because of a woman; I am more heart-broken than if my own mother died.” He suddenly slapped his chest. “But as long as I have breath left in my body, I’ll fight to the bitter end. You don’t need to provoke me, I will definitely keep going all the way to the finish.”

“Oh?”

“Zhu Meng’s head isn’t here for just anyone to take. Not even to help you achieve your aims. And I don’t need your help to achieve my aims.” His large eyes stared at Sima Chaoqun. “Our battle today is not about life and death, victory and defeat. I don’t care about that. However, it seems like you are trying to help me.” His voice became more harsh. “If you try to do that, then you are not a person raised by loving parents, but a person raised by dogs. If you hold back even one move or stance, then I will die here and come back as an evil spirit to haunt you.”

Sima Chaoqun looked at him, at his large bloodshot eyes, at his frame, which, although gaunt, still carried the spirit of a fierce lion. After a long time, he said, “Very well. I promise you. No matter what, in today’s battle I will use all my power and fight to the death.”

Zhu Meng looked at him, this man who had once been the most outstanding figure in the world, the greatest hero under heaven, and yet who had fallen deep into the muck. He let out a sigh. “You and I are doomed to be enemies. I only wish that in my next life, we can be friends. Regardless of who wins or loses today, who lives or dies, this is my wish.”

Part 5

The wind grew colder.

The distant mountains were cold, the dark grave was cold. The men stood in the cold wind, but their hearts were filled with hot blood.

This hot blood would never grow cold.

It is because the world has people like this whose blood will never grow cold that we should never have fear in our hearts, because as long as people like this exist, then righteousness will also exist.

This point must be emphasized, because this is the essence of spirit.

Dusk grew deeper.

Standing there in the twilight, Sima Chaoqun and Zhu Meng had become two indistinct shadows.

But in the eyes of the men, their blood boiling, these two shadows were more brilliant, greater and stronger than anyone else in the world.

This was because theirs was not a struggle of life and death, of honor and glory, of victory and defeat.

They gave no regard for the life and death, the glory and honor that others in the world could never abandon. They were simply doing something that they believed must be done.

It was because of their principles of conduct.

Heads can be lopped off, blood can be spilled, riches and honor and glory can be discarded like old shoes. But principles can never be discarded.

—Isn't it true that some people will say they are too foolish to act in this way?

—What kind of person would say such a thing?

Part 6

Zhu Meng stood respectfully, facing off against Sima Chaoqun. Life and death would be determined in the blink of an eye.

Strangely, the spirit that had dissipated the rage between the two of them was not revenge, but uprightness.

Zhu Meng suddenly asked, "For nearly ten years, you have never been defeated, have never met your match. The weapon you use to deal with your enemies is a Thousand Hammers Great Iron Sword, correct?"

"Yes."

"Then where is your sword?"

"My sword isn't here, but I am," said Sima Chaoqun. "You're here to battle me, not my sword. As long as I'm here, it's good enough."

"You came to a struggle of life and death, victory and defeat. Why wouldn't you bring your sword?"

"Because my bare hands are enough to slay a lion."

Zhu Meng slowly wrapped his belt back around his waist, leaving him with two empty hands.

"I've roamed Jianghu my whole life," he said. "I love to exact vengeance. Who knows how many faithless, immoral, dishonest, impudent villains I've assassinated with my blade? When I kill people, I usually use a Great Sweeper Blade."

"Where is it?"

"Here," said Zhu Meng. "My blade is here."

He stretched out his hands, and someone brought forth his Great Sweeper Blade, a weapon which could retrieve the head of an enemy from within an army of tens of thousands.

"It's a good blade," said Sima Chaoqun. "A killing blade."

"It is a good killing blade," said Zhu Meng, caressing the sharp edge. "But this blade has always killed villains, not heroes."

The blade was in his hands.

His left hand gripped the hilt, his right hand began to twist the edge. A clashing sound rang out. The blade was still in his hand, but now it was now in two pieces.

The broken blade became a flying rainbow. It flew off into the deep, dark, dusk. It flew until it was nowhere to be seen.

Zhu Meng's voice grew hoarse, so much so that it seemed he could barely talk. But his bravery had not gone anywhere. "If Sima Chaoqun can use his bare hands to slay a lion, can't Zhu Meng give it a try as well?"

His hands clenched into fists, fists of iron. Sima Chaoqun's fists of iron were as sharp as blades.

"You've traveled far, and you are the guest," said Sima. "I won't force you, but you should really be the first to make a move."

"Great!"

When he heard Zhu Meng say "great," Man Niu knew that he himself would soon be finished.

"Man Niu" was a person, a true man. (3)

But sometimes he acted more like an ox. He had the temper of an ox, and the stubbornness of an ox. Wilder than a wild ox, and fiercer, he was also strongly built, just like an iron ox.

But sadly, this iron ox's heart seemed to be made from porcelain. The slightest touch could shatter it.

So he sat as far away as possible.

The others stood, but he sat, because he feared that he couldn't handle it.

There were many things he couldn't handle.

What he could least endure were those petty villains who sold out their friends. When he met people like that, he would readily put his life on the line to deal with them.

He also couldn't handle the kind of friends who burst with personal loyalty, because when he met people like that, he would readily give his life over to them. Give his life without any requirement, and without regret.

So when he heard Zhu Meng say "great," when he saw Zhu Meng begin to attack with his fists, he knew that he himself would soon be finished. It was similar to when Cleats had seen Zhu Meng standing next to Little Gao. Other than death, there was no second path to take.

He only wished that before he died he could see Zhu Meng and Sima Chaoqun battle. And he wished that before he died, he could follow Zhu Meng to the Great Protection Agency and battle Zhuo Donglai.

If he could accomplish these things, then it could be said that God had not treated him poorly, and he could die without complaint.

Only death could provide release from the suffering of the ages. He had already prepared to die, so his requirements were not excessive.

And yet God did not agree.

He watched Zhu Meng seemingly revert to his former awe-inspiring self, brandishing his iron fists, attacking. And then suddenly from behind him flew out a black noose. It encircled his throat.

Man Niu wanted to cry out, but it was too late.

The noose tightened, crushing into his Adam's apple. He felt all the power in his body dissipate. His muscles grew slack. Excrement oozed out.

Zhu Meng and Sima were locked in fierce combat, and the attention of everyone else was fixed on them. No one noticed that he was dead. No one even cast a glance at him.

And so this iron ox of a man quietly left the world.

His death was even more tragic than that of Cleats.

Part 7

When masters battle, usually it is a matter of one move. Life and death, victory and defeat are usually determined in brief moment.

Sima and Zhu Meng's battle was different.

Theirs was a bitter battle.

They were both exhausted. Not only were their hearts exhausted, but their bodies were worn out.

Their hands no longer had the strength to use stances that could slay an enemy in the twinkling of an eye.

Occasionally Sima's fist seemed clearly capable of overcoming Zhu Meng, but after attacking, his power and position were half what they should be.

Zhu Meng's situation was the same.

These two heroes of the age, who could rebuke all of Jianghu, now seemed like two wild beasts locked in a life-or-death struggle. A truly a grievous sight.

What was strange, though, was that Zhu Meng's brothers seemed to have no reaction whatsoever.

When Zhu Meng was knocked down, struggling to regain his footing, they didn't react at all, as if completely unconcerned.

They had all been attacked by an opponent before. Getting up after being knocked down was nothing special.

But then when Sima fell, his eyes suddenly filled with an unspeakable dread. His body flipped over; he rolled toward Zhu Meng and grabbed his leg.

This was not a stance that a hero and true man would use.

Sima Chaoqun had roamed wildly his whole life, and had never used a stance like this. Zhu Meng never imagined he would.

And so he was knocked down. The two of them rolled on the ground. Zhu Meng's anger rose. A banging sound rang out as he slammed his fist onto Sima's back.

Sima held onto him tightly and didn't let go. Then he spoke quietly into Zhu Meng's ear, in a very strange voice: "It seems your brothers are all dead. But we must pretend that we don't know."

Zhu Meng was shocked, and wanted to ask. "Why?"

But he didn't utter a word, because Sima covered his mouth, and once again spoke into his ear, "We must keep fighting, make them think that our battle will end in mutual defeat, that we're going to kill each other."

Zhu Meng was no reckless brute.

He was a worldly-wise person, and he realized that the situation had suddenly changed.

His brothers were all there, but their heads lolled loosely on their necks.

He caught scent of a sickening, nauseating odor.

As they were fighting their bitter battle, someone had silently broken the necks of all of his brothers.

Could his brothers, who had fought with him through a hundred battles, really be killed so easily?

Zhu Meng didn't believe it. He couldn't believe it and wasn't willing to believe it.

But his body was filled with coldness.

Sima seized the opportunity to flip over and press down on Zhu Meng, then punch his sides and ribs.

But he didn't hit very hard. And his voice was even softer.

"It doesn't matter if we are enemies or friends. You must listen to me. Otherwise we will both die filled with regret."

“What do you want me to do?”

“We go. Together,” said Sima Chaoqun. “When I say go, jump up and leave.”

Someone suddenly laughed.

An eccentric-sounding voice spoke out, “It turns out Little Sima is a little smart. But sadly, Zhu Meng is still useless.” The person laughed sinisterly. “The world contains only Zhu Meng the killer, not Zhu Meng the escaper.”

Sima suddenly leaped up and said, “Go!”

Part 8

Night. Cold and dark. Even a person with strictly trained eyes would have a hard time seeing the trees and rocks, let alone be able to distinguish roads and directions.

In any case, this place had no roads.

If a person reaches a place with no roads, it generally means that they are at the end of their own road.

Sima Chaoqun panted. Even though it seemed his lungs had already burst, he still tried to control the sound of his breathing.

Every bone and muscle in his body felt as if were sitting on a butcher’s block, being carved with a knife.

Zhu Meng’s situation wasn’t any better. The two of them stood shoulder to shoulder, panting unceasingly. Even though they could not hear the bowstring or the footstep of the hunter, they both felt the hopelessness and bitter sorrow of injured wild animals on the run.

“Do you know who that person was?”

“Yes,” said Sima. “It wasn’t just one person, and they are both capable of dealing with us.”

Zhu Meng laughed coldly. “I never imagined that the matchless Sima Chaoqun would say such discouraging words.”

“It’s not discouraging. It’s the truth.”

Zhu Meng said nothing. A long time passed. Then he spoke. “Yes. It’s the truth,” he said, his voice filled with sadness. “Sima is not the same Sima from the former days, and Zhu Meng isn’t the same Zhu Meng as before. Otherwise, how could we be pursued like wild dogs into the middle of nowhere?”

“I understand what you mean. You would rather die than flee. The world only has Zhu Meng the killer, not Zhu Meng the escaper. But why would you be willing to give your head to despicable, brazen villains? Why would you deliver up your own head to them so that they can take over your reputation and glory, your good wine and happy songs?”

“I also understand what you mean,” Zhu Meng said harshly. “If we have to deliver up our heads to someone, it should be someone worthy. Not Zhuo Donglai.”

Suddenly, the sound of applause could be heard within the darkness.

“Well said. Very well said.”

It was the same eccentric person, with the sinister voice. “Two such wonderful heads. Why deliver them to that bastard? I think it would be much better to deliver them to me.”

His voice was both far and the near, both from the left and then the right. It made it impossible to tell where exactly he was.

Zhu Meng’s body grew stiff.

This person was not Zhuo Donglai, and was more fearsome than Zhuo Donglai. In his entire life, Zhu Meng had never encountered someone with a more frighteningly high level of lightness kung fu. He simply couldn’t

believe that there could be someone in the world who had achieved such ability, to be able to flit about at will like a demon.

He quickly regained his calm, as Sima Chaoqun whispered in his ear, "It's not one person speaking, it's twins. As long as we remain calm, they won't act rashly. We mustn't allow them to see the truth about our current state."

At this moment, the two of them were suddenly illuminated. Every wrinkle and scar and expression was illuminated.

At least thirty deftly constructed Kongming lanterns shone brightly in all directions, shining onto their bodies.

In this instant, they stood there straight and erect, their faces expressionless.

Even though they could not see their opponents, they would not allow their opponents to see their fatigue and pain and fear.

They had fought through hundreds of battles. Their bodies had been forged into steel. They would never surrender, and whoever it was that demanded their heads would not find it an easy task.

Though the lanterns shone brightly, the surrounding darkness was as black as ever.

Sima Chaoqun suddenly laughed.

"Gongsun Gongsun, you've been well since we last parted?" Smiling, he said, "I know that you two are people who know what is good and bad. If I help you achieve your goals, help you gain power, you will definitely give our headless corpses a decent burial, and come spring and autumn, you will commemorate us and place fresh flowers and fine wine in front of our tombs."

Laughter rang out from the darkness. "Well said. Very well said."

This time the laughter rang out from both the right and the left at the same time. And then two people walked out from the darkness into the shining lantern light.

They looked completely different.

One wore a crown of pearls and a jade belt, and carried a long, pearl-encrusted sword. His clothes were as resplendent as a young noble's.

The other appeared to be a beggar, crippled and leaning on a long wooden crutch.

But if you looked carefully, you would see that their statures and appearance were exactly the same.

—Gongsun Gongsun.

—Twin brothers.

Zhu Meng suddenly found himself thinking about two people. Two people who he'd always thought had nothing to do with each other.

—The extravagant chief of the 27 tribes of Northeast China, whose lifestyle rivalled even the pickiest young lord. "Rich Prince" Gongsun Baojian. (4)

—The endless wanderer, too poor to eat 3 meals per day, frequently drunk in the gutter, rejected even by the Beggar Sect. Gongsun Qi'er. (5)

No one knew that they were brothers, much less that they were twins.

They were blood brothers. Why would one live a life of luxury and the other live in poverty? Zhu Meng still hadn't wrapped his mind around it when he suddenly thought of two other people.

He suddenly thought of Sima Chaoqun and Zhuo Donglai.

—Why would Zhuo Donglai mould Sima Chaoqun into the world's heroic idol?

The truth of the matter was complex and simple. Simple, and yet complex. Zhu Meng had a hard time figuring it out, let alone others.

And yet at long last, Zhu Meng did figure it out.

If Sima Chaoqun hadn't known that these two were twins, he would have believed that Gongsun Baojian was an unparalleled lightness kung fu master. When he heard his demonic voice, he would have been awestruck, just as Zhu Meng had been moments ago.

And now Zhu Meng understood. It was all a smokescreen.

They were like fireworks in the palace courtyard when curfew has been lifted on the night of Lantern Festival. They seem to be brilliant and amazing, full of constant changes, but they are really like the Seven Treasures Pagoda (6) or a performance of the Fish Dragon and the Stretch Monster. (7)

They are fake, empty. In the twinkling of an eye they are revealed to be false and empty, empty and false.

But they truly had mastered the ability to control the brilliance for a moment.

Some people might think that to have that sort of control, is to control eternity.

But if life is like an inn, then in the unhurried unchangeableness of heaven and earth, what real difference is there between "a moment" and "eternity?"

Among them was one who was willing to sacrifice, and to do so with no regret.

But the only question was—who was the one willing to sacrifice? And which one was truly content?

Zhu Meng could not figure out the answer to this question, and in the current situation, he didn't have time to continue thinking about it.

He heard Sima Chaoqun speak to the brothers.

"Actually, I knew you two would arrive." He was still smiling. "Several years ago, you had already cultivated the desire to expel me from the Great Protection Agency. You just didn't have the confidence to do it. And you two will never attempt something if you lack confidence. Therefore, you had to

wait until today.” He suddenly sighed. “I just never thought you would arrive so quickly.”

“You should have,” said Gongsun Baojian. “We have been waiting a very long time for an opportunity like today’s.”

“But how could you know that the opportunity had arisen?”

“Of course I would know.”

“When did you find out? I know that you have no truly fine horses in your stables. Even traveling a thousand miles in a day, the fastest you could arrive would be in four or five days. Don’t tell me that five days ago you predicted yesterday’s events, that Zhuo Donglai and I would become enemies and oppose each other?”

“You never thought that I would have spies placed in the Great Protection Agency?”

“Of course I did. But that would be useless.”

“Why?”

“Because five days ago, even I myself never imagined there would be a day like today. How could others know?”

“What about Zhuo Donglai?”

“He didn’t imagine it either.” Sima’s voice held pain. “Until I actually drew my blade, he never imagined that I would.”

“Oh?”

“And even if he did imagine that it would happen, he wouldn’t tell you.”

“Oh?”

“The friendship between us lasted for over decades. Even though it was destroyed in an instant, there is still no one in the world who understands him better than me. Even if he wanted to betray me, he wouldn’t betray me to you.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re not worthy,” he said indifferently. “In Zhuo Donglai’s eyes, Your Excellencies the brothers aren’t worth a coin, even added together.” He sighed again. “So, I really don’t understand how you are here today, unless you actually have some sort of ability of foreknowledge.”

Gongsun Qi’er suddenly let out a sigh. “Even though I don’t have the ability of foreknowledge, I did just think of something.”

Gongsun Baojian asked his brother, “You thought of something? What did you think of?”

“I suddenly thought that you should be like me. You should wander around Jianghu for a while.”

“Why?”

“Because if you were like me, an old hand at trickery and deception, you would understand his true goal.”

“What is his true goal?”

“His true goal is to keep us chatting with him, to keep talking. His courage is departed, his energy sapped, his power exhausted. He is using time to chat with us so that he can restore his vitality. Then, when we make a move, who’s to say whether or not he could hold his own for a while?” He shook his head. “Refusing to give up until all hope is lost, not giving up until the very last moment. (8) Until his head is actually lopped off, Little Sima really won’t drop the idea of prevailing.”

Sima Chaoqun laughed, as did Zhu Meng. They laughed heartily.

“Well said. Very well said.” Zhu Meng laughed at Gongsun Qi’er, and then beckoned to him. “Come, come. Come on over. The faster the better.”

“You want me to go over?”

“Grandfather Zhu has taken a liking to you, you tricky and deceptive little bastard. I want to deliver my head to you. You just need to come get it.”

Sima Chaoqun laughed loudly and slapped him on the shoulder. "Good. You can have this little bastard. Leave the bigger bastard for me."

"Good. Let's do it." Zhu Meng's laughter was filled with heroism. "If we can't handle these two little sons of bitches, then we need to go buy some tofu to beat ourselves to death with."

The two of them stood shoulder to shoulder, laughing in unison. Whatever is "life," and whatever is "death," it was pushed to the side by their laughter.

The expressions on the faces of the Gongsun brothers hadn't changed.

Some people's faces will never change, and will never have new expressions. These brothers were like that. Gongsun Qi'er let out a breath and asked his brother, "Did you hear what our dear friend said?"

"I heard."

"Who is he?"

"It seems he's Zhu Meng, of the Lion Clan."

"Impossible," said Gongsun Qi'er. "It couldn't be him. Zhu Meng of the Lion Clan is a true man who knows the difference between gratitude and resentment. He's never been able to live under the same sky as Little Sima of the Great Protection Agency. How could they suddenly be wearing the same pair of trousers together?"

Zhu Meng suddenly clasped Sima Chaoqun's arm. In a deep voice, he asked, "Did you hear what the beggar said?"

"I heard very clearly."

"He spoke with the air of a beggar, but he really hit the nail on the head regarding our situation today. We have been mortal enemies for our entire lives. Who would ever have imagined that today we would become friends willing to die together?"

"Are we friends?"

“Yes,” said Zhu Meng loudly. “From today onward, we might as well write off the old hatred of former days.”

“Good. Very good.”

“We become friends in one day, we remain friends for life. As long as I, Zhu Meng, am not dead, then I will keep this vow, lest I be slain by men and spirits alike.”

Sima Chaoqun felt hot, righteous ardor filling his head. “Don’t worry. We won’t be slain.”

The ardor was like a fire; once stoked, it heated their heroic spirits. The last bit of ability they possessed had been sparked ablaze.

Because they finally realized that they were not alone in the world.

Because each man knew he had a friend, a friend willing to die with him, a friend faithful regardless of life or death.

Having lived to this moment, they could die without regret.

They clasped hands, feeling that the righteous ardor carried with it some sort of mystical power. It poured forth from their hearts until their faces seemed to glow with a brilliant aura.

And now the expressions on the faces of the Gongsun brothers changed.

Zhu Meng and Sima turned around at the same time. They were back to back.

“Come, you two,” said Sima Chaoqun loudly. “It doesn’t matter how many you have with you, come all at once.” The sun had set in the western mountains. The heroes had reached the end of the road, and the Gongsun Brothers had considered them to be fish in a cauldron, meat on the chopping block.

But now they retreated two steps.

Now they understood that even when heroes reach the end of the road, they are still heroes, and will not tolerate insults.

At this moment, the sky grew darker. It seemed they had reached that time before dawn when the night was darkest.

Within the boundless darkness, there suddenly could be heard a cold and desolate sound. It was the melancholy yet graceful voice of a young girl. She sang a desolate and slow song, a sad song that would be difficult to remove from the mind.

Where did the singing come from?

On such a cold, dark evening, in these desolate and harsh mountains, how could there be someone singing such a sad, heartbreaking melody?

**

- (1) This is the same real type of poison that I mentioned in my 7 Killer's translation. Here's a link: <http://goo.gl/oUlfSh>
 - (2) He's referring to himself as "laozi" in all of this.
 - (3) I believe I explained before that Man Niu's name literally means something like "fierce ox"
 - (4) In accordance with my usual method, I will translate the name into pinyin. However, the given names of these two characters are very literal. Baojian means "treasured sword."
 - (5) Qi'er literally means "beggar."
 - (6) This is reference to a mythological pagoda. Sorry, I couldn't find any English articles about it, it's relatively obscure.
 - (7) This is an acrobatic performance popular in ancient China. Sorry, I couldn't find any English articles about this either.
 - (8) These are two cool Chinese sayings. The first is "to not die until one reaches the Yellow River." The second is "to not shed tears until one sees the coffin."
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CHAPTER 18 – HARDEST DON'T DIE

Part 1

The second month, the twenty-seventh.

Outside of Chang'an, on a wild, desolate mountain.

There was still some time left before daybreak. A sheet of darkness covered both heaven and earth.

Beneath the light emanating from the scores of Kongming lanterns, the shadows of two people appeared like ghosts, accompanied by singing. One carried a pipa, the other, a bamboo flute.

The shadows were indistinct, the singing plaintive. Even in one's peripheral vision it could be seen that these two were the same two who had been at Chang'an Restaurant that night. It was the white-haired old blind man, accompanied by the heartbreakingly pitiful young blind girl.

Why would they have suddenly appeared here? Did someone make special arrangements for them to come sing their sad melody?

"Beautiful hair combed and wrapped into a bun, makeup lightly applied to the face; Dark blue smoke and purple fog cover the gracefulness, catkins and gossamer strands float by with no set destination."

It is not until the silkworms die, that they stop producing strands of silk.
It is not until the candles burn out, that they they cease to shed their tears.

The ardor and bravery in Zhu Meng's face suddenly transformed into gossamer threads.

Because he had caught sight of someone.

Someone suddenly appeared from within the darkness, like the specter of a butterfly in a dream, her face covered with fine gauze, wearing a dancer's outfit as sheer as a cicada's wing.

The dancing outfit fluttered.

Zhu Meng shed no tears, because he had none.

Even his hot, righteous blood had run dry.

He knew it was not Die Wu, but her dancing had led him into the fantasy of a butterfly. It seemed to be real and not real. It seemed to be a fantasy and not a fantasy.

What was it: real or fantasy?

What if it was real? What if it was a fantasy? Life is so temporary, and emotions are so important; is there really a need to take things so seriously?

Let it go! Let everything go! Go with the butterfly. That is the best.

He knew that right now, anyone could draw a sword and lop off his head, but he didn't care.

He was already prepared to give up everything.

But Sima Chaoqun wouldn't allow him to. The song was still being sung, the dancer still danced. Sima Chaoqun pounced forward like a cat, ready to destroy the butterfly with its sharp claws.

The dancer did not try to flee, but instead stepped forward. She used an indescribably graceful dancing movement to move forward, sidestepping his attack. And then she suddenly whispered two words into his ear. No one could hear these two words, but everyone could see Sima Chaoqun's reaction.

"Tong tong."

These were the two words she had spoken. Two words that had no meaning at all.

“Tong tong.”

Anyone that heard these two words would have no reaction whatsoever. But to Sima Chaoqun, it seemed these two words were like lighting striking from mid-air.

In an instant, he became motionless. His limbs grew stiff, and his eyes filled with shock and dread. He took two involuntary steps backwards.

“Tong tong.”

The two words seemed to be some type of magical spell that in the twinkling of an eye had absorbed Sima Chaoqun’s soul.

How could this be?

Who was this unknown woman, this dancer who came from nowhere? How could these two seemingly completely meaningless words make Sima Chaoqun act in this way?

No one could offer an explanation. But, there was something else that could be seen by anyone.

—Sima Chaoqun and Zhu Meng were finished. Their heads could be taken by anyone at any time.

The blind, white-haired old man could see nothing, but the sound of his playing already contained a feeling of desolation and harshness.

There suddenly existed an impermeable killing air. Even the lamplight seemed to have become pallid and wretched. It shone on the pale faces of Sima and Zhu Meng, as well as the sword gripped in the hand of Gongsun Baojian.

His sword would soon unsheathe, and a head would soon fall to the ground. Within the wretched lamplight, something flashed. Within the flickering lamplight suddenly shone forth a radiance even more tragic than what had shone before.

It shone for a moment and then disappeared. A sword pierced a chest and then disappeared.

Gongsun Baojian's sword was still sheathed. It had been knocked to the ground by another sword.

This new sword had not flown down from heaven, but had stabbed forth along with a flying person.

The person and the sword had appeared so quickly, it was as if they were one entity.

Had the sword stabbed forth with the flying person? Or had the person flown forth with the stabbing sword?

No one could distinguish this point; no one could see clearly what had happened.

But everyone could clearly see the person.

At first sight, it appeared to be a young version of Sima Chaoqun; dashing, tall, elegant, powerful. He wore a colorful, well-tailored set of clothing, cut from the finest cloth. His eyes shone with confidence.

At first sight, no one could possibly realize that this was the once down-and-out, nameless Jianghu swordsman, Gao Jianfei.

Part 2

The music had stopped. The dancing had stopped. The dancer lay curled up on the ground, as if unwilling to lift her head to see the blood of the dead.

Little Gao held his unsheathed sword. No traces of blood could be seen on the long, beautiful blade, only tear stains.

Gongsun Qi'er stared amazedly at this person and his sword. Even though he already held the rod in his hand in a spear-like attack position, he was not brave enough to strike.

Zhu Meng and Sima Chaoqun still stood there dumbly, as if they hadn't seen anything.

Gongsun Qi'er suddenly shouted, "Where is everyone? Are you all dead? Why don't you come out?"

From beyond the lights came a soft voice: "You're right. All your men are dead. The people holding the lanterns now are mine."

A person stepped out casually from the darkness. He was dressed magnificently, with a violet marten coat. He held his hands clasped behind his back.

Gongsun Qi'er's facial expression changed. "Zhuo Donglai. It's you."

"Yes. Of course it's me," he said casually. "Only I would be able to use your own methods to deal with you. Zhu Meng's men are all dead, and so are yours. The method you planned to use to kill people, I use to kill you." He smiled. "You should know that I always do things extremely fairly."

Gongsun Qi'er suddenly shot forward. His long rod stabbed toward Zhuo Donglai's face like a red phoenix.

The staff flew forward. But it had already left his hands. He flipped backwards, flying into the air like a sparrow hawk, fleeing from the light toward the unseeable darkness. His reaction was very fast, his ability to adapt to the situation quite formidable. It was the essence and accumulation of a lifetime of experience in martial arts.

But sadly he was just a little bit too slow.

As soon as his body flitted into the air, he saw the dazzling aura of a sword flying up like a rainbow. In an instant, it was in front of him, the shocking coldness of the aura so bright that he couldn't open his eyes.

By the time he was able to open his eyes, he could not see the sword aura any more. All he could see was a sword hilt, protruding from his chest.

Even as his body collapsed to the ground like a stone, he stared at the sword hilt in shock and terror. It was as if he couldn't understand how a sword hilt

could be protruding from his chest. And yet, he definitely knew where the blade of the sword was.

In his chest.

A flying sword, a deadly attack.

“Such a fast sword. Such a fast move!” Zhuo Donglai bowed and raised his clasped hands respectfully toward Little Gao. “Based merely on the might of this sword, you are already qualified to lead the Great Protection Agency.”

“Lead the Great Protection Agency?” It seemed as if Zhu Meng had just been pulled out of a dream. He slowly turned around, staring at Little Gao with eyes that seemed about to burst from his eye sockets.

“You lead the Great Protection Agency?”

Little Gao said nothing.

“Good. Very good, Gao Jianfei.” Zhu Meng laughed. “It seems you’re already gradually flying up.” (1)

His laughter cracked. “If you’ve come to take the head off my neck, then by all means take it.” Zhu Meng laughed hoarsely. “I’ve wanted to give it to you all this time. More than anyone else.”

Xiao Gao didn’t laugh, and seemed to have no reaction whatsoever. In these few days, he had trained himself to become like a rock. His face was devoid of even the slightest expression.

“Why are you here?” shouted Zhu Meng. “What are you waiting for?”

“I’m in no hurry,” said Little Gao calmly. “Why are you? If I’m willing to wait, so should you.” He suddenly turned and faced Sima Chaoqun. “You should be even more aware what I’m waiting for.”

A long time passed, and then Sima Chaoqun raised his head. It was as if this was his first time seeing Little Gao, as if he had already forgotten everything and everyone.

More time passed. Finally, in a very strange tone of voice, he asked Little Gao, "What are you waiting for?"

"I'm waiting to settle accounts with you."

"Good. Very good." His voice seemed to be filled with an unspeakable sadness. "It's time to settle accounts. What people owe me, what I owe people, it must all be settled."

"Considering your current situation, I shouldn't force you to make a move," said Little Gao coldly. "But when you defeated me last time, my situation wasn't much better."

Sima Chaoqun suddenly laughed.

"I never blamed you, there's no reason to say so much."

"Hold on," Zhu Meng suddenly shouted. "Don't tell me you've forgotten our agreement?"

Sima Chaoqun's face sank. "You'd best step back a bit. This is between me and Gao Jianfei. If anyone get between us, I will be forced to end my life."

Zhuo Donglai let out a soft sigh. "When heroes reach the end of the road, they are still heroes. Clan Leader Zhu, you also are a hero of the age. You should understand him. Why let the reputation of another hero be dragged into the dust?"

He didn't cast another glance at Zhu Meng, but instead walked forward and pulled the sword out of Gongsun Qi'er's chest.

There was no blood on the sword, only tear stains. He gripped the blade of the sword between his thumb and forefinger and handed it hilt-first to Gao Jianfei.

"Your sword."

Little Gao didn't take it.

"I know it's my sword. But I also know that he has no sword."

“He doesn’t. But you do.”

Little Gao laughed. “Correct. He doesn’t, but I do. It seems that’s the current situation.”

Zhuo Donglai calmly said, “There are many things in the world that end up like this.”

“I understand,” said Little Gao. “I completely understand.”

He finally reached out and took the sword.

In this moment, the smile disappeared from his face, replaced by a murderous look.

In that moment, he stabbed forward with the sword.

The tip had been less than an inch from Zhuo Donglai’s chest, and was pointed straight at his heart. He had used his own hand to grip the blade and hand it over. This was a mistake that could not be made. People who made this type of mistake ended up dead.

Zhuo Donglai couldn’t be an exception.

Under these circumstances, he had no way to escape or defend himself.

Gao Jianfei had been waiting, waiting for just this type of opportunity.

His eyes were fixed on Zhuo Donglai’s face, because everything he had done had been in preparation for his split second.

The time when the tip of his sword would pierce Zhuo Donglai’s heart.

—In this split second, what was the expression on Zhuo Donglai’s face?

There was none. Because he had already predicted everything that could happen. His body moved backward.

The power of the sword did not cease, it continued to stab forward.

And he continued to move backward.

Power, unceasing energy, completely filled the sword.

He continued to retreat.

He still clasped the sword tip between his two fingers, and it was still the same distance from his chest.

Little Gao stopped.

Sweat drenched his clothes.

Zhuo Donglai looked at him coldly. In an exceedingly warm and quiet voice, he said, "You really went to a lot of trouble this time. It took a lot of scheming to gain this opportunity, a lot of effort. You did very well. I really should let you kill me."

His voice contained no trace of sarcasm, because he was simply stating the facts.

"But you should know that killing someone like me isn't an easy matter. I can't let you succeed so easily. Otherwise, killing me would be meaningless."

Gao Jianfei listened.

He only listened.

At the moment, everyone had no choice but to listen to Zhuo Donglai. Other than him, who was there that could say anything?

And then he said something that left everyone shocked.

"If you kill me, then your death is also certain. If your sword stabs me in the chest, then in that instant, your death is fixed. You might even die faster than me."

Zhuo Donglai seldom told lies, but this time what he said was hard to believe.

Little Gao couldn't hold back from asking: "You're saying that if I stabbed you with my sword, my death would be faster than yours?"

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I know that in the world there are at least 5 types of hidden weapons that can truly seal the throat and kill someone in an instant. And there are at least three people in Jianghu who use those types of weapons.”

“Oh?”

“And the most important point of all is that I happen to know that one of those people is here, and one of those weapons is pointed straight at your back. If you stab me, it would be a very exciting moment, and you would be extremely proud of yourself. In that situation, it would be difficult for anyone to avoid being distracted. You’re no exception.”

This was a fact.

“At that moment when you were the most happy and proud, you would suddenly feel a prick on your back like the bite of an insect. Then you would fall down, and as you fell, your heart would stop, and you would be dead.”

Cold sweat poured down Little Gao’s back.

Zhuo Donglai casually continued, “But you can relax. Because I’m not dead, and for the moment you don’t dare to make a move. Because that person is like me, never willing to do anything unless 100% confident of success.”

“Who is this person?”

“If you want to know who it is, then you first need to realize three things.”

“What three things?”

“First, how did the Gongsun brothers gain foreknowledge? How did they find out five days ago that there would be such huge changes in the Great Protection Agency? How did they arrive here so promptly? Second, this dancer, her face covered in gauze... where did she come from? Just now, Sima Chaoqun was going to kill her to protect Zhu Meng. Why did he suddenly retreat after hearing her say two words? Why did he suddenly change?”

Little Gao couldn't figure out either of these two things.

"Actually, these two matters are actually one in the same," he said, providing somewhat of a hint. "Similar to the way that some rooms have two doors, but one key to open them."

Little Gao laughed bitterly. "Unfortunately, I don't have the key. And I don't know where to find it."

"Keys are usually held by living people. Dead people don't need keys. But as for this key," he said coolly, "it wouldn't hurt to look on the body of a dead person."

"Which dead person?"

"The Gongsun brothers have no gift of foreknowledge. For them to arrive promptly was because someone asked them to come. But," he asked, "who is it that, five days ago, could possibly predict that the thirty years of friendship between Sima and I would be destroyed in an instant?" He answered his own question. "Only one person. Our falling out was because of one person."

"A dead person?"

"Yes. This person should be dead," said Zhuo Donglai. "She knew that after she died, Sima would not let me go. Because when she was alive, she had already placed a poisoned dagger between Sima and I."

Little Gao's eyes suddenly flickered, and he asked, "A woman could disguise another woman as herself. But could she really fool her own husband?"

"If she was alive, she couldn't," said Zhuo Donglai. "But after a few days of death, the situation would be different. After a person has been dead for a few days, the muscles become twisted and hard. The facial features change. And if she hung herself, the changes would be even greater, more horrible. Anyone would be fooled."

Little Gao sighed. "If someone returns home to find that his wife and children had all died tragic deaths, he would most likely be unable to see anything clearly."

One word at a time, Zhuo Donglai asked, "And if he suddenly found out his wife wasn't dead, how might he change?"

"He would probably become a completely different person." Little Gao let out another long sigh. "But why? How could a women be so cruel? How could she do something like this?"

"In the world there are some types of people who will do anything. It doesn't matter if the person is a man or woman. You don't understand, because you aren't that type of person."

"And you?" Little Gao asked Zhuo Donglai. "Are you that type of person?"

"I am."

Part 3

Sima Chaoqun's pale face completely lacked any color. Seeing him, Zhu Meng felt horrible.

The dancer, overwhelmed by emotion, still lay on the ground, as if she hadn't heard a word Zhuo Donglai said.

Zhuo Donglai looked at her coldly. "Actually, I don't blame you, because we both are the same type of person. You clearly knew long ago that there are three people in the Great Protection Agency who oppose me. And only those three could possibly deal with me. You conspired with them secretly, and that is how they could arrive so promptly."

The dancer was speechless.

"You did everything to protect yourself," continued Zhuo Donglai, "and for that, I wouldn't hurt you. But sadly, you made a mistake." His voice suddenly changed. He used his unique tone, one word at a time, to say, "No matter your reasons, you should not have treated Sima Chaoqun this way."

Based on his outward appearance, Zhuo Donglai did not appear to be a brutal and vicious person. But when he spoke in this tone of voice, anyone listening would feel their hair stand on end, and would tremble with fear.

And the person who understood him the most was, of course, Sima Chaoqun.

Whenever he spoke in this tone to someone, it meant that person had been sentenced to death.

“Don’t touch her.”

Sima lurched forward, placing his body in front of the mysterious dancer. “Whatever she did,” he said harshly, “I don’t blame her. All these years, I never treated her well. Even if I die under her hand, I do not permit you to touch a hair on her head.”

Zhuo Donglai’s expression suddenly changed. His pupils constricted, and he shouted, “Watch out!”

But his warning was just a bit too late.

The dancer leaped up from the ground, crying coldly, “You must die. Die!”

Along with the shout, three shining stars shot forth, flying toward Sima’s back.

Zhuo Donglai used his left foot to hook Sima and pull him to the side, then struck Little Gao’s ribs with his right palm. His left hand, which still gripped the sword, wrenched backwards, and then the sword was in his right hand. These movements all occurred in a split second, so quickly that it seemed almost unbelievable.

And yet again, he was just a bit too late.

Sima had been pulled to the side, and two of the flying hidden weapons had been deflected, but the third was embedded into his left upper arm.

Zhuo Donglai did not take time to think. The sword in his hand shot forward. The sword aura glittered, slicing Sima’s arm clean off.

When a viper bites the hand, a brave man will lop it off.

Little Gao knew that the weapons would contain poison. This was the only way to prevent the spread of the poison, and to save Sima's life.

But he had to ask himself—If he was Zhuo Donglai, would he be able to make such a decision so quickly?

The wind from the sword lifted the dancer's gauze mask.

Wu Wan.

The mysterious dancer really was Wu Wan.

Part 4

The severed arm fell, blood spattered, but Sima Chaoqun still stood there, as straight as a javelin, towering like a giant.

The sword aura shone, seeking Wu Wan.

But Sima, using his remaining bare hand, grabbed hold of Zhuo Donglai's sword.

"Don't touch her," he said, his voice miserable and hoarse. "I said, it doesn't matter if I die or live, you can't touch her."

His arm had been severed, but not his spirit.

Zhuo Donglai's sword was restrained by his spirit, and he could make no move.

"Wu Wan, I still don't blame you," said Sima. "Leave."

Wu Wan looked at him, looked at her husband with an indescribable expression.

“Yes, I should leave,” she said softly. “I should already have left.”

But she didn’t leave.

Instead, she suddenly threw herself forward and embraced him, pressing her face against his severed shoulder, using her face to stop the blood from pouring out.

Flowing blood covered her face, and flowing tears.

“I chose the wrong path in life,” she said. “And I can’t make the same mistake again. This time I will not make the same mistake.”

She’d already chosen her path.

The only path.

Zhuo Donglai still held the sword.

Wu Wan suddenly gripped her husband forcefully and shoved herself forward toward the tip of the sword. The sword stabbed into her back, piercing her heart, and piercing Sima’s heart.

The treasured sword truly was incomparably sharp.

“Tong tong,” Wu Wan said in a whispered moan. “Tong tong, at long last we can die in the same year, the same month, the same day. Die together.”

This was the last thing she ever said.

“The sword is ruthless, the hero sheds no tears.”

Sima Chaoqun still stood there as straight as a javelin. He shed no tears.

Until death, he did not fall. Until death, he shed no tears.

Part 5

The tears of the hero had already transformed into righteous blood.

There was no blood on the sword, only some tear stains. But as of now, it seemed as if those mysterious tear stains had been dyed red by the blood of the hero.

Zhuo Donglai still held the sword, and he was looking at the tear stains.

He didn't look at Sima, and didn't look at Wu Wan.

His eyes were completely devoid of tears.

And yet, his eyes stared dumbly at the tear stains, as if they might contain some sort of mysterious and evil power, and that they were the source of all the misfortune that had occurred. A long time passed, and then he suddenly said, "Of the three people that came today, the truly fearsome were not the Gongsun brothers, but the third person." His voice was ice cold. "This person really shouldn't die, because he is extremely intelligent and very powerful. Very few people can compare to him when it comes to hidden weapons and face-changing ability. If he had quietly slipped away just now, I might have pretended not to notice, because I would most likely be able to make use of him later."

"He didn't leave?"

"No," said Zhuo Donglai. "He knows that he made a mistake, and he knows that now I won't let him leave." He suddenly turned around and faced the blind, white-haired musician. One word at a time, he said, "Mr. Ji, you can't possibly think I didn't recognize you, do you?"

The white-haired musician had been standing just where the lamplight gave way to darkness. The light was dim, and his figure was also dim.

The young girl with the ponytail stood next to him, holding a pipa. Her pale-white face was filled with neither sadness nor terror. Perhaps it was because she could not see, or perhaps because she had already grown completely numb to everything.

The white-hair musician carried a flute in one hand. His other hand rested on the girl's shoulder. No expression existed on his face.

"Mr. Ji," said Zhuo Donglai. "Three flashes to rob life, two steps to change disguise, one strategy to deprive offspring. Mr. Ji, your face-changing ability is brilliant, and your methods are even more amazing." (2)

The white-haired musician finally spoke. "You flatter me. Thank you, thank you."

"Mr. Ji, you had Wu Wan dance Die Wu's dance. In an instant, it destroyed the fighting spirit of Clan Leader Zhu Meng of the Lion clan and Sima Chaoqun. It was an incredible move."

"Thank you, thank you."

"The white-haired musician and his beautiful young granddaughter sing on the street to make a living. Who would take notice of a blind old man like that? So you disguised yourself as him and brought his granddaughter here with you. You covered up the faults in Wu Wan's dancing with the blind man's music, and used her dancing to capture everyone's attention. In fact, no one would know anything about the old musician's facial features, but you could never possibly match the desolate nature of his music. This point, everyone could hear. Except, under the circumstances, no one was paying attention."

"You're right," admitted Mr. Ji. "That's exactly what I was thinking."

"Mr. Ji, you really are a rare talent. An amazing talent. I've always admired you." And then Zhuo Donglai's soft and polite voice suddenly changed. In his unique tone of voice he said, "But you really should not have given your Offspring Depriving needles to Wu Wan. That was truly a mistake."

Mr. Ji sighed. In a very sad voice, he said, "I admit I was mistaken. Even though I never imagined that Wu Wan would use them on Sima, he did die because of it. I should have known that Mr. Zhuo would call me to account for it."

"Perhaps because you thought it would only be deadly to someone else, you forgot that those needles were your best way to defend your own life."

Mr. Ji had to acknowledge the truth of this. “No matter the situation, I shouldn’t have given the needle tube to someone else.” He sighed, and then, in a whisper-soft voice, said, “Luckily, I have several more tubes left.”

His voice was low, as if he was telling a deep secret to a trusted friend.

Zhuo Donglai surely must listen carefully to be able to hear.

Even as he listened, Mr. Ji’s Offspring Depriving needles shot forth. They flew from within the emptiness of his sleeves. Three tubes of needles were enough to cut off any route of escape for Zhuo Donglai.

One tube with three needles was enough to chase a soul and take a life. What about three tubes? Not to mention that his needle tubes and the needles themselves were carefully hand-crafted. Their speed was greater than almost any other hidden weapon in the world.

Yet, Zhuo Donglai was even faster. He did not evade. The sword in his hand spun into a circle of light. The sword’s aura raged in a circular motion, like a raging whirlpool-like vortex in a pool of water. In the twinkling of an eye, nine flashes of light were sucked into the vortex. By the time the sword aura vanished, three tubes worth of needles were nowhere to be seen.

Mr. Ji’s heart sank.

Gao Jianfei was a student of the sword, and he could not hold back his praise. “Great sword skill!”

Zhuo Donglai smiled. “Your sword is amazing. Extremely amazing.”

He suddenly turned again toward Mr. Ji. “When I was speaking just now, it was also a good chance. Why didn’t you seize the opportunity to attack me with your remaining two needle tubes?”

Mr. Ji’s hands clenched into fists. They were filled with cold sweat. “How did you know that I have two needle tubes left? How could you know something like that?”

“Regarding you, I know something about everything. I know more than you could even imagine.”

Mr. Ji let out another long sigh. "Mr. Zhuo, you are far more powerful than me. You are far more powerful than everyone. You will definitely prevail." In a sad voice, he said, "From today on, I will never again betray you."

"From today on?" Zhuo Donglai appeared to be astonished. "Do you really believe that you will have another day after today?"

There was no change in Mr. Ji's facial expression. When a person uses a face-changing ability, their facial expression usually will not change.

But his body changed, the same way a viper will change when it meets a celestial crane. It became tense and distorted.

"What do you want from me?" he asked Zhuo Donglai. "I'll do anything you want."

Zhuo Donglai nodded. "I don't want much from you. I just want you to do something extremely simple. It's something that anyone can do."

Mr. Ji didn't notice that his pupils had constricted. He asked, "What do you want me to do?"

One word at a time, Zhuo Donglai said, "I want you to die."

Death. Sometimes it is an extremely simple thing.

Mr. Ji met death quickly. The sword in Zhuo Donglai's hand flashed radiantly, and then he died. The sword aura flickered, and then the sword was buried in his throat.

Gao Jianfei could not hold back his praise. "Excellent sword technique. Such a fast sword!"

Zhuo Donglai smiled again. "Your sword is an excellent sword. Better than I ever imagined. Actually, I'm starting to think that I can't bear to give it back to you."

Part 6

Zhu Meng didn't move at all. Instead he thought quietly.

This was definitely not like him. Sima's death should have sent his blood pumping with righteous fury, caused him to raise his arms in the air and roar crazily.

But he didn't move. Because Sima's death had caused him to think of many things, and each one stabbed into his heart like a long spear.

—Why would Wu Wan do this? For revenge? Or to protect herself?

When a person makes a mistake, but places the blame on another, then their heart fills not with guilt but with the desire for revenge. And then they will seek retaliation. This behaviour is one of humanity's most primitive of weaknesses.

To make a mistake and then hurt others to protect yourself is just as bad.

Selfishness. Even sages and holy men, immortals and buddhas, can have trouble overcoming this hurdle, let alone ordinary men.

But Zhu Meng's thinking was different.

He suddenly thought that perhaps the reason Wu Wan did it was because of her deep love for Sima, a love she could not control, that left her helpless.

When you love to that degree, in that way, love can reach the ultimate level: destruction.

And so she destroyed herself. Not only herself, but everything she loved.

Sima could understand this, and so he did not blame her.

What about Die Wu?

When Zhuo Donglai ordered his men to attack the Lion Clan Hall that night, why did she flee? Why would she rather flee and be used by Zhuo Donglai?

Did she leave because of "love?" Or because of "lack of love?"

If she loved him deeply the way Wu Wan loved Sima, but believed that Zhu Meng didn't care at all about her, then of course she would leave.

If she didn't love Zhu Meng, then she would of course have even more reason to leave.

But if she truly didn't love him, then why did she care so much about him? Why did she have to die?

Lack of love is hate. Extreme love will also become hate. There is a very thin line between love and hate.

Was it love, or hate? Who could tell the difference? Who could understand it?

Zhu Meng finally laughed crazily.

"Sima Chaoqun, you died well. You died extremely well." His laughter was as sad and shrill as the call of an ape. "You deserved to die, because you really were just a hopeless fool."

When he finished laughing, Zhuo Donglai coldly asked him, "And what of you?"

"I'm even more deserving of death," said Zhu Meng. "I wanted to give my head away, but no one wanted it. Instead they wanted me to die under your hand, which is really not acceptable."

Little Gao suddenly said, "You can't die." In a step he reached Zhu Meng, stood next to him and clasped his arm forcefully. "Anyone who wants to touch him must first kill me."

Zhuo Donglai looked at Little Gao, and it was as if he were looking at his own child whom he had spoiled. A little bit angry, but full of pity. "Regardless of how you treat me, I haven't done anything to you. When you wished me dead, I also did nothing. I think you can understand what I'm talking about."

Little Gao couldn't deny it. "Of course I understand," he said. "You want me to become the new Sima Chaoqun."

Zhuo Donglai sighed quietly.

“He was the only friend I ever had in my life. No matter how he treated me, nothing can change that.”

“I believe it.”

“Do you believe that I can kill you at any time I want?”

“I can’t compare to you in martial arts or sword skill,” said Gao Jianfei. “And your scheming can’t be matched by anyone under heaven. Just now you said that Mr. Ji was an amazing talent, but the truly amazing talent is not him, it’s you. Who cannot admire you?” He stared at him. And then, using Zhuo Donglai’s unique tone, said, one word at a time: “But trying to kill me is pointless. Even if I die, I still won’t let you touch Zhu Meng. As long as I have spirit left, just one bit of spirit, you won’t be able to defeat me.”

One spirit?

What kind of spirit? Energy? Chivalry? Bravery? Loyalty? Or would it be a mixture of all of them, combined with manly courage to create uprightness?

Zhuo Donglai’s pupils began to gradually constrict. “I can’t deny that you do have some spirit left. But,” he asked Little Gao. “Where is your sword?”

“In your hand.”

“In my hand, so it’s mine. Do you have another sword?”

“I don’t.”

Zhuo Donglai laughed. “You have nothing, but I do.”

The sword was in his hand, unsheathed.

This sword could split hairs in two. The hands that held it were fearsome, even more fearsome than the sword itself.

When these hands killed someone, they left behind no blood, and not even the slightest tear stain.

"If you really want to do this, then so be it," said Zhuo Donglai. "Perhaps it's destiny. Who has the ability to change a person's destiny?"

This man, these hands, this sword; in a flash they could definitely decide a person's fate and destiny.

Zhu Meng suddenly tilted his head back and laughed again. "What joy can true men find in life? What fear do they find in death? As of today I, Zhu Meng, finally understand." His laughter gradually faded. "Gao Jianfei, to have made friends with a person like you, I can die without regret. But you're still young. It's not worth it for you to risk your life for me."

Having said this, he used the tip of his foot to flip up Gongsun Baojian's sword. His hand shot out to grab it, and then his arm twisted toward the back of his neck. By exerting a bit of power, his head would fall to the ground.

But Little Gao had already grabbed his arm with one hand, and the blade of the sword with the other. A dinging sound rang out, and the sword blade snapped off the hilt.

"Why won't you let me die?" Zhu Meng said harshly.

"Why do you want to die?"

"So that you can live," said Zhu Meng. "I should already be dead. Once I'm dead, there's no need for you to risk your life by going up against Zhuo Donglai. I can die a worthy death, without regret. I can die knowing my life was worth living."

"You're wrong," said Gao Jianfei. "Your life or death has nothing to do with the battle to be fought today. And whether you live or die, it will be fought."

"Why?"

"Because Zhuo Donglai won't let me go. If I don't die, then he will die by my hand. And if I'm able to kill him, he won't live to see sunrise." He grasped Zhu Meng's arm. "Those two sentences you just uttered were incorrect. True men are born into the world, and they must live. They must live happily. When they die, their death must have value. If you die now, you're

just delivering up your life along with mine, and your death will not be worth a copper coin.”

Zhuo Donglai suddenly laughed. “He’s correct. If you wait until he’s dead, it won’t be too late for you to die as well. Why be so anxious to throw away your life? Do you think I will offer you my thanks if you do?”

Zhu Meng’s hand relaxed, but Little Gao gripped it even more tightly.

“If I live through today,” said Little Gao, “I’ll not only help you revive the Lion Clan, but I will reform the Great Protection Agency. There’s plenty of time for everything, and many bright prospects. As long as we are still living, there’s no need to say the word ‘death’ so lightly.”

Zhuo Donglai let out a sigh. “He’s correct again. If you are alive, why die? Why look down upon your own life?” With another sigh, he continued, “Unfortunately, when the time has arrived for one to die, then death truly is difficult to avoid. There are no exceptions.” He looked at Little Gao, his pupils already constricted. “As of now, the time of your death has arrived. Because, you made another mistake.”

“What mistake?”

“You shouldn’t have broken that sword. With a sword in your hand, you might be able to defend against me for about thirty stances. But now, I can take your life in ten.”

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, they heard a cold, arrogant voice ring out: “I’m afraid that this time, the one who made the mistake is you.”

Part 7

The light of early dawn gradually approached, making the lantern light seem more and more gloomy. Between the mountain tops, white, milky strands of morning sunlight began to appear.

Within the dense fog could suddenly be seen the shadow of an unfathomable person, carrying an even more mysterious box.

"Xiao Leixue, it's you."

"Yes, it's me," said Xiao Leixue, ever so coldly. "You must have thought I wouldn't arrive, considering how much confidence you have in your Fragrance of the Gentleman. But you should know, that type of gentlemen isn't always completely reliable."

Zhuo Donglai let out a long sigh. "Xiao Leixue. Mr. Xue. Why do you always appear at times when you shouldn't?"

"I'm just that type of person, I suppose."

"I don't like that type of person. Not at all." His voice had regained its calm tone. "I've met people like that before."

"And they're all dead under your hand?"

"Yes."

"Are you trying to provoke me into attacking?"

"Yes."

Zhuo Donglai faced the shadow in the fog without the slightest hint of fear. "I said before, when the time has arrived to die, who can escape?" His voice seemed very similar to Xiao Leixue's, just as cold and arrogant. "I truly believe that, unfortunately, it's hard to say who will die under whose hand today."

Zhu Meng looked at him, surprised, as if he had never someone like this before.

It was because he had never imagined that Zhuo Donglai was this type of person, so arrogant.

It was, in turn, because he didn't know that when a man's heart is filled with inferiority, he will often result to arrogance.

In any case, Zhuo Donglai still held “Tearstains.”

Some people believe in destiny, some do not.

But most people will admit that within the underworld exists a cold, ruthless, and mysterious power, and that many of the inexplicable events in the world occur because of it.

—When the treasured sword was forged, it was the envy of gods and demons. It required a sacrifice by he who forged the sword, the blood of a relative, to be able to cleanse the sword of the tear stains, to rid it of the demonic fiend.

He who forged the sword most certainly believed in destiny, and therefore left behind the tear stains.

And Xiao Leixue?

As to whether or not he believed, this shadowy, unfathomable figure within the fog, who is there that could possibly guess what existed in his heart?

And then, he unexpectedly asked, “Gao Jianfei, do you still have your sword?”

“I don’t. I lost it. He has it.”

“Opportunity,” said Xiao Leixue. “Losing your sword quite the good luck. And snapping the other sword was truly a great opportunity.”

“Opportunity?” said Little Gao. “I don’t understand.”

“Because I can only pass down my Technique of the Broken Sword to someone without a sword. Even if it was just a snapped sword in your hand, then I still wouldn’t give it to you.”

“Give me... what? Technique of the Broken Sword?” Little Gao still didn’t understand. “What is the Technique of the Broken Sword?”

“There is no sword technique under heaven that cannot be broken, and no sword that cannot be snapped. Even less likely to find is an unbeatable swordsman.” Xiao Leixue continued, “If the weaponry and stances you use

are suitable, then when you meet a sword wielder, you can break his technique, break his sword, break him. This is the Technique of the Broken Sword.” (3)

His voice seemed to carry a sort of mysterious power.

“Twenty years ago, I viewed the sword wielding masters under heaven as scorpions and vultures. But now, I view them as nothing more than dung and dirt. As far as I’m concerned, none of them can withstand a single blow.” He suddenly asked Little Gao, “Gao Jianfei, is your opportunity still here?”

“It seems it is.”

“Then come here.”

“And Zhuo Donglai?”

“He can just wait for a bit. I won’t keep him waiting too long.”

Part 8

Zhuo Donglai watched Little Gao walk over. He didn’t try to stop him, nor did he seem to have any reaction whatsoever. He seemed perfectly willing to wait for Little Gao to learn the Technique of the Broken Sword.

But he wouldn’t learn it, Zhuo Donglai told himself: Even if Xiao Leixue really did have some sort of Technique of the Broken Sword, he couldn’t teach it to Little Gao in such a short time.

But perhaps there really was some mysterious understanding or relationship between the two of them, some sort of spiritual communication ability.

Perhaps Little Gao really could use some type of special inspiration to master the profoundness of the Technique of the Broken Sword.

Even though Zhuo Donglai continued to try to reassure himself, deep in his heart he felt extreme pressure.

He carried in him an inexplicable dread of Xiao Leixue, because Xiao Leixue seemed to have some innate power over him—a mysterious power bestowed by gods and demons, a power both profound and evil.

Xiao Leixu had already opened his box.

The sky was light by now. The sun had just risen, and a ray of sunlight shot forth through the accumulated clouds.

At that moment the only thing that could be heard was “click, click, click, click,” four sounds. Then a mysterious weapon appeared in Xiao Leixue’s hand.

As the first ray of sunlight shot forth from the east, it landed on the weapon, and transformed into a flash of mystery and evil.

No one had ever seen a weapon like this before, and no one knew what mysterious ability it contained.

But everyone could see that it contained a mysterious and evil power.

Zhuo Donglai’s eyes shone.

In his heart suddenly rose the possibility of an opportunity. He had conceived a plan which with 90% certainty would be able to send Gao Jianfei to his death.

And then a power suddenly filled him, an enormous power that he had never felt. Even he was shocked by it.

The feeling carried with it something like a supernatural curse, with the ability to take control of his hand in order to rid the world of a certain person.

It was as if within the box had been locked away some sort of evil spirit which could capture souls and take lives. As soon as the box opened, someone’s life would be snatched away and locked inside the box, lost forever.

Zhuo Donglai had never believed in gods and ghosts and immortals and Buddhas. But he believed in this; he believed that there existed powers in the world which men did not understand.

Because as of now, he was experiencing such a power.

Xiao Leixue handed the weapon to Little Gao.

“You might as well go over now,” he said. “Go take Mr. Zhuo’s life and bring it back here. This weapon has never been seen before in the world, and it will never appear again.” His voice seemed to be a curse from the underworld. “Heaven required me to create this weapon specifically to deal with Mr. Zhuo. When it appears, it is the stamp of death for him. Regardless of whose hand wields it, he will die just the same.”

Part 9

The dense clouds once again blocked the sunlight. The lanterns had burned out, the sky was overcast, murderous intentions stirred. Even gods and ghosts would find redemption impossible.

Gao Jianfei flitted forward like a bird.

Zhuo Donglai’s needle-like eyes gazed at weapon. He suddenly shouted and tossed “Tearstains” directly at Little Gao. “This is your sword, have it back!”

No one could have expected this move, not even Little Gao.

This sword had been with him for many years. From the beginning until now it had always been by his side. It had become an extremely important part of his life, almost an extension of his body, fused with his bones and blood.

And so without even thinking about it, he grabbed the sword—he grabbed it with his sword hand, as if he had completely forgotten that in his sword hand was a sword-breaking weapon.

It was as if in that moment he had absolutely no thinking ability, and couldn't control himself at all.

After all, a rational person would never in these circumstances do something so stupid.

Zhuo Donglai smiled.

Now Little Gao had a sword again, but the sword-breaking weapon was his.

He was man of sky-high intelligence, with eyes sharper than almost anyone. Xiao Leixue had spoken just a bit too much, and had given him enough time to take a very clear look at the shape and construction of the unique weapon. He could clearly see that the weapon had many ways to control the sword of an opponent. He had also discerned the methods to use it.

Regardless of the opponent.

Only Xiao Leixue could create a weapon like this, and only Zhuo Donglai could do something like he just had.

They were two completely different types of people, but in some ways they were completely the same, as if they were thinking the same thing.

A tragic expression appeared on Zhu Meng's face.

He'd never imagined Little Gao would do something so stupid, and what happened next left him even more astonished.

Gao Jianfei flew up like a bird, then, his sword blurring into the shape of a flower, stabbed down toward Zhuo Donglai.

Generally speaking, Little Gao should not have been the one to make a move first. However, in this situation, his best chance would be to attack Zhuo Donglai before he had time to truly understand the construction and use of the weapon.

He clearly underestimated Zhuo Donglai's intelligence and discernment.

From within the dazzling sword aura could be seen the shapes of countless flickering swords. But there was really only one sword.

Within the countless sword shadows, of course there was only one true stance.

Zhuo Donglai took one glance and knew which was the true stance. When it came to this type of attacking skill, using false stances to disguise true stances, his understanding was far beyond that of most people in the world.

He also saw that the weapon had at least four or five sections. Any of them could neutralize the power of the opponent's sword, or even take the sword away completely, then follow up instantly with a fatal attack. But he didn't want to do something so final.

He still was not completely familiar with how to use the weapon, so why not try it out first on Little Gao?

He was already quite confident that he could take Little Gao's life at any time.

Therefore, he wasn't the least bit anxious.

Little Gao's sword stabbed down, and he extended the weapon up to meet it, using a ring hook on the top side to snag Little Gao's sword.

A dinging sound rang out as the sword and the hook met. And then the weapon produced an almost magical effect that no one could predict. Another section of the weapon popped up to combine with the hooked ring, and, just like pincers, clamped Little Gao's sword down, holding it.

Zhuo Donglai was surprised and quite happy. He never thought that the weapon would be so powerful.

And then something even more unthinkable happened. Little Gao's sword suddenly passed forward through the weapon.

This was something that should not be happening.

Why create such a complicated and ingenious weapon that would let the opponent's sword stab right through its middle?

Could it be possible that the weapon was actually created to allow a sword to pass through it? Could Little Gao have intentionally allowed his sword to be latched, just to be able to use this lethal function?

Zhuo Donglai had no chance to contemplate the matter further.

In the time it takes for lightning to flash, or sparks to fly off rocks, Little Gao's sword had stabbed into his chest, piercing in an inch and a half. That was as far as it could stab.

But it was long enough. An inch and a half was long enough to be fatal. It had stabbed directly into Zhuo Donglai's heart.

—The weapon truly had been created to defeat Zhuo Donglai.

—Only Zhuo Donglai could, in a mere moment, understand the construction of the weapon. Only Zhuo Donglai would think to switch the sword in his hand for the sword-breaking weapon. No one else could think of it, let alone do it. —Unfortunately, what Zhuo Donglai had thought of, Xiao Leixue had already thought of for him, and prepared for.

—The weapon was a carefully prepared trap, just waiting for Zhuo Donglai to step into.

And now, Zhuo Donglai understood.

"Xiao Leixue. Mr. Xue. It turns out I was right. You are my nemesis. I calculated long ago that I would eventually die under your hand. Otherwise," he said wretchedly, "how could I have been fooled by you?"

Xiao Leixue looked at him coldly. "Don't you remember? I said that regardless of who wields the weapon, it would be fatal to you. Even if the hand that wields it is your own!" His voice grew even more cold and detached. "You should know that I always speak the truth."

Zhuo Donglai laughed sadly.

His laughter caused vibrations in his heart and the edge of the sword. He suddenly felt as if were being stabbed again; the sword pushed in just a bit further. The distance between life and death was now just a thin line.

Little Gao slowly pulled the sword up, and carefully slid the weapon off of it.

The clouds suddenly parted again, and sunlight shone through, illuminating the sword.

Zhuo Donglai looked at it, and his face suddenly filled with an expression of nearly infinite horror.

“The tear stains?” he asked hoarsely. “Why are there no tear stains on the sword? Don’t tell me that ...”

There was one question that if he did not ask, he could not die peacefully. And yet, he didn’t ask it.

—Could it be that he was a relative of Grandmaster Xiao? Could it be that the father he had never laid eyes on was none other than the Grandmaster? And therefore, when he was slain by the sword, the tear stains disappeared?

—Or was it that the utterances of gods and ghosts were untrustworthy, and the tear stains had disappeared merely because their time had expired?

No one could answer these questions, except perhaps the old man in the pavilion. But he was dead, slain by Zhuo Donglai himself.

Perhaps the question Xiao Leixue had wished to ask the old man was this question. And if the old man had given him a certain answer, perhaps he wouldn’t have sent Zhuo Donglai to his death.

But sadly, it was already too late.

Zhuo Donglai’s heart had been pierced, and he died never understanding.

This result was instigated by him, was it not?

Part 10

In the sunlight, the sword's looked like limpid autumn waters. (4) The tear stains on the blade had disappeared.

Gao Jianfei stared dumbly at it, trying to wrap his mind around everything that had happened.

He didn't understand.

Time passed, and he finally realized that he could ask Xiao Leixue.

But Xiao Leixue was gone. Zhuo Donglai's corpse and the weapon were also gone.

Zhu Meng said, "Mr. Xiao left already. He took Zhuo Donglai with him." His heart was also filled with shock and uncertainty. "What is going on?"

Little Gao stared off into the distance. Clear skies abounded.

"It doesn't really matter," said Little Gao. "From today on, we most likely will never see Mr. Xiao again."

The lantern lights had been extinguished, and those carrying them had dispersed. The only person left was the young blind girl with the pipa.

Sunlight illuminated heaven and earth, but her eyes could only see sheets of darkness.

Gao Jianfei's heart suddenly filled with an unspeakable pain. He couldn't hold back from asking the young girl, "Your grandfather, is he still alive?"

"I don't know!"

Her pale white face was completely blank. It contained no emotion whatsoever, not even grief.

But anyone who laid eyes on her would feel a prick of pain in their heart.

"Where is your home?" asked Little Gao. "Do you have a home? Do you have any relatives there?"

The little girl said nothing. She just held the pipa tightly, like a drowning person holding tightly to a piece of driftwood.

—Could it be that the only thing that existed in her life was her pipa?

“Where are you going to go?” asked Little Gao. “What are you going to do?”

Even as he asked the question, he regretted it.

This type of question should not be asked. How could a little girl with no relatives, no purpose in life, no one to rely on, be able to contemplate such matters?

How could she think about it? How could she bear to? How would you, dear reader, expect her to answer?

Who could ever imagine that this young girl, fated to live her whole life in darkness, would suddenly respond in a bright voice, “I want to keep on singing. I want to sing forever, until I die.”

Part 11

Who could imagine the feeling in the hearts of Little Gao and Zhu Meng as they silently watched the young girl walk into Chang'an Restaurant, carrying her pipa?

“I think she will keep on singing,” said Zhu Meng. “As long as she is alive, she will sing.”

“I think so too,” said Little Gao. “And I think that if anyone tried to stop her from singing, she would probably die.”

She was a singer, so she would sing, sing for others. Even if the songs she sang were all sad, and caused people to shed tears, well how can people truly understand happiness without understanding sadness, or truly treasure life?

Even though she had nothing, she would live on.

If she couldn't sing, her life would become meaningless.

"What about us?" asked Zhu Meng. "What do we do now?"

Little Gao didn't answer, because he hadn't even thought about it.

And then suddenly he noticed the brilliant sunlight and the glorious earth.

"We should also keep singing." Gao Jianfei suddenly straightened his back and said, "Even though our singing is not like hers, we can still sing. Sing until we die." The singing of the singer, the dancing of the dancer, the sword of the swordsman, the pen of the scholar, the fighting spirit of the hero... as long as life exists, these things will never be cast aside.

The shining sun rose, the snows had melted. A person carrying a solitary box quietly left the ancient city of Chang'an.

A quiet, ordinary person. An old-fashioned, ordinary box.

**

(1) This is a play on words because his name “Jianfei” contains the characters “gradually” and “fly.” If you remember when he introduced himself a long time ago, he explained his name in this exact way.

(2) In the sentence “one strategy to deprive offspring” the word for strategy being used in Chinese is 计 ji, which is the same as Mr. Ji’s surname. 计 is also a Chinese surname.

(3) I need to explain briefly about this. After his explanation, the technique sounds pretty cool. But in Chinese, when he first says it, it makes it sound something like “Crappy Sword technique.” The word 破 po has multiple meanings, and thus the reason that Gao Jianfei doesn’t understand at first. It’s an intentionally clever use of words.

(4) For anyone who read my translation of 7 Killers, yes this the same word that appears there quite frequently.

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